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Preface/Foreword

Hello, and thank you for choosing to read this.

This book is about a Clan of cats who live in a boreal forest. The main character is Dawnclaw, the mother of a kit who has Reactive Attachment Disorder.

(Note: In this book, medicine cats are not only trained in medicine and healing, but are also similar to psychiatrists.)

What is Reactive Attachment Disorder?

This is a disorder that usually presents itself before the age of five, and can continue on into adulthood if not treated. It occurs when children are neglected (Although not many neglected children develop this disorder.) It is rare/uncommon (as are most attachment disorders) and it can be a serious/severe condition, where children cannot connect with a nurturing parent or caregiver.

There are two types of RAD, inhibited and disinhibited. (Sablekit has inhibited)

Common symptoms of inhibited RAD are:

•Not smiling
• Failure to react/reach out when picked up
• Avoiding eye contact
• Excessively holding back emotions
• Not seeking/responding/being resistant to comfort.
• Avoiding physical contact
• Detaching self from others.
• Preferring to play alone.

Common symptoms of disinhibited RAD are:

• Not having the natural anxiety towards strangers, will readily interact with them.

• Being highly selective.
• Unnaturally seeking comfort from strangers
• Exaggerating the need for help doing basic, everyday tasks
• Appearing overly anxious.
• Partaking in inappropriately childish behavior.

Please note that real cats cannot develop this disorder, at least to our knowledge. This is a strictly human mental illness, but since these cats are pretty heavily anthropomorphized, it's fine!

Please do not self-diagnose yourself with this, even if you fit the symptoms. (However, if you truly believe you have this disorder, than talk to an adult to help get you diagnosed.)

Prologue

•◇•

"I'm not afraid of God, I am afraid of men"

•◇•

Dawnclaw smiled at the small bundles that were nestled beside her belly.
Her purr disturbed them, and one opened her mouth in a silent protest.

Despite how calm she appeared, inside , Dawnclaw was fearful. She was a warrior, not a queen! But that had changed. And a queen, she will be.

Dawnclaw was unsure of what to do, but at least she had Minkfoot to help her. But then again, Minkfoot probably wouldn't want to help her, the two had never gotten along that well.

Dawnclaw sighed. She just wanted to give these kits the best chance of life that they could have. SpruceClan life was something that Dawnclaw loved, and she wanted her kits to experience it in the best possible way.

"Dawnclaw? May I come and take a look at your kits?" A pleasant vice asked. Swiftear, the medicine cat.

"Of course, Swiftear. I want them to be in good health!" She mewed, her words was supposed to come out joking, but the anxiety that was swirling around inside of her projected itself into her speech.

He gave her a sympathetic glance, his bicolour fur appearing darker as he entered the shaded den.

"The first litter is difficult for everyone, at least, so I've been told." The good-natured medicine cat smiled as he sat down next to her. "I remember when Lynxheart had his first litter. He told me the kits had been driving Duckflight bee-brained!"

Dawnclaw smiled back; some of her worries lifted.
"Good thing to know that we're all like this!"

Swiftear purred in response. He crouched, his belly fur lightly brushing the ground.
"I'm going to examine the kits now." He told her.

He gently stretched out a paw,and batted a little brown tabby kit towards him.
"This one was the youngest?" He asked.

Dawnclaw nodded in confirmation. Did it really matter which one was the youngest, which one was the eldest?

Swiftear's yellow eyes narrowed as he peered at the kit.
"This little she-kit seems in perfect health."

Dawnclaw watched carefully as he looked over each kit.

"They all seem fine. Five perfectly healthy kits! I must warn you, five kits will be a pawful. Make sure they all get equal amounts of care and attention." Swiftear said, his voice deepening as he became serious.

Dawnclaw nodded.
"Thank you so much, Swiftear." She said sincerely.

He dipped his head in gratitude.
"Tell me, have you named them yet?" He asked.

She shook her head, a feeling of love washing over her.
"Yes, Pinetuft and I chose them together last night." She paused.

Pointing to each kit in turn, she said their names.
"Coyotekit is the little ginger tabby, the black kit is Sablekit, the tortoiseshell is Meadowkit, the brown tabby is Martenkit, and the dilute tortie is Maplekit." She finished.

"Great names! Well, I simply must go, I have to collect as many herbs as I can before leafbare hits. Talk to you later!" He waved his tail, and then galloped out of the den.

Dawnclaw looked at her precious kits.
"Oh, I just can't wait to see what you're like when you're older, my little ones."

———————

What do you think of it so far?
~ Blackbird

Chapter One

•◇•

"I feel numb most of the time"

•◇•

It had been four moons since the birth of the kits. And Swiftear had been right, it was tiring.

Meadowkit had decided to imitate her once-denmate, Fishpaw. The older she-cat had relished in the flattery of it in the beginning, but soon tired of it, and Dawnclaw had needed to talk to her first born, to talk her out of the behavior.

Coyotekit had proved to be quite the recluse, it had been worrying. He had rarely left the den, but luckily that appeared to have been a passing phase. The young tom-kit now played happily with his siblings, but he still loved the comfort of the den.

Maplekit was quiet, she was thoughtful. She hadn't caused that much trouble, but Dawnclaw had learnt that Maplekit was behind any misbehavior, and was remarkably sneaky. Dawnclaw always had to keep an eye on her!

Martenkit was energetic, bouncy and gullible. She fell for every trick played on her, and was constantly getting in trouble because of this. Dawnclaw always offered the little brown tabby support, because, while she currently didn't seem to care too much when her siblings laughed at her, Dawnclaw knew that innocence didn't last forever, and she didn't want her kit to get hurt.

Sablekit was different. He wasn't enigmatic exactly.. she supposed he was merely antisocial. He never played with the other kits. In fact, he never really spoke to them, nor to her. He spent ages alone. He was an odd kit. Dawnclaw never really spent time with him, even when he was younger. Managing five kits had been even more difficult than she had imagined, and she didn't have as much time as she wanted.

•◇•

She pricked her triangular ears as shrieks sounded through the air. Dawnclaw rose to weary paws as she walked out into camp.

She was greeted by the sight of her kits all playing together happily.

Maplekit was batting at her brother's nose, her mouth curled into a smug smile. Coyotekit was squeaking every time his nose was hit, and Martenkit and Meadowkit were giggling.

It was the perfect sight for any mother to see. But not Sablekit. He was merely watching, not even that. His eyes were fixed on the ground, his expression rather neutral. But his gaze held sadness, or fear? Dawnclaw couldn't tell, it was as if he was wearing a mask.

She sat down, concern prevalent in her amber gaze. Cocking her head, she continued to observe. Was that what Sablekit was doing? Solely watching? That was what Dawnclaw wanted to believe, but she knew there was something was wrong. Most kits, even quiet, antisocial kits, behaved differently to him. Those kits seemed happy, kits had no worries in the world! But Sablekit never smiled. He also seemed sad, or irritable. Then again, Dawnclaw hadn't really spoken to her kit in a while. She wanted to.. but she didn't know how to interact with him.

It was easier when he was younger.

She thought. But then she paused. She couldn't seem to drag up a memory of really bonding with him.

She remembered the times she truly bonded with each kit. She remembered comforting Meadowkit when Deerpaw and Fishpaw became apprentices, and the little she-kit was convinced she had lost all her friends. She remembered the feel of the kit's warm, fluffy fur cuddled against her.

She remembered when Martenkit had been tricked to go outside of camp, and she had hurt herself. Dawnclaw remembered soothing the little kit as she talked happily about her adventure, despite the tears still drying on her fur.

She remembered when Coyotekit had a nightmare, and cuddled into her for comfort.

She remembered when she found Maplekit outside at night, and the two had talked about the meaning of life, and how everything came to be. It was odd, that such a young kit could think of such deep things.

But Sablekit.. She couldn't drag up a memory where she really bonded with him. In fact, now she thought about it, the little kit had progressively become more inhibited, not really speaking to other kits, or herself.

It worried her. Surely her relationship with Sablekit was a healthy one, between mother and kit?

"Sablekit, come on and play!" A shrill yowl jolted Dawnclaw from her thoughts.

She watched with interest to see Sablekit's reaction to the offer of inclusion.

The black kit raised his eyes to Martenkit, it was she who had called him.

He said no words.
He made no movement.
He just looked at her, then turned his head.

It was an obvious act of rejection, but a strange one at that. Most kits would have vocalised their answer, but Sablekit didn't. Most kits would've been doing something else, not observing a game.

Sablekit is far from a normal kit . But every kit goes through stages , right ?

A/N

How was this?
I'm enjoying writing this!
It wasn't as long as I'd like, but this was more of an introductory

chapter, the plotline develops as the story goes on.

Fact of the Chapter: There are three Clans, SpruceClan (the Clan where this is set in) OakClan, and ElmClan

Chapter Two

•◇•

"Guess what? I'm not a robot"

•◇•

It was dusk, cats were beginning to shed the sluggishness that the day brought, sunset was when they became alive.

Dawnclaw was in the nursery, her usual dwelling. She was staring at a spot on the inside of the bark of her den, her amber eyes fixed, but unfocused.

Her thoughts were on the event that had occurred last sunrise, with Sablekit's odd reaction at being invited to play.

It was playing on her mind, there was no denial that her kit was different. But what was the definition of different? Was he simply different, unusual, but still normal? Or was there something wrong with him? Dawnclaw didn't want to consider the idea that her kit could be anything but perfect.

A scuffle behind her caught her attention, Meadowkit had stood up. She waved her short tail, a cheeky grin on her face.

"Come on, Dawnclaw, let's go!" Meadowkit purred, and raced out of the den.

She's quite a tall kit. Dawnclaw mused as she followed. Her dilute tortoiseshell fur glowed, and she looked up at the sky. It was quite cloudy, but the sunset was still visible, with faint pinks streaking the sky.

"Red sky at night, hunter's delight." She meowed the saying her mother had always told her.

Her mate, Pinetuft, who was standing near, gave a purr of

amusement.

"StarClan, you and your sayings." He said affectionately.

Dawnclaw smiled and brushed her tail lightly across his spine. He responded by licking her ear slightly, then he shook his dense, black tabby coat.

"How are the kits?" He asked.

Dawnclaw twitched at the question, how could she tell him that something could be wrong with Sablekit?

Nothing is wrong with him , you silly old frog ! Sablekit is perfectly fine .

"They're good." She mewed vaguely. "How was your day?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, it was good. I was patrolling the ElmClan border, it was peaceful, as per usual. Honestly, those cats are the biggest peacemakers I've ever seen. They might as well be kittypets!" Pinetuft said animatedly.

Dawnclaw laughed.

"They are, aren't they!"

The two twined tails, until Pinetuft broke away.

"I'm going to ask Yellowtail if there's any patrols that I need to go on." He told her.

Dawnclaw nodded, though disappointment dropped in her heart. She wished Pinetuft would spend more time with her, but she knew he was busy. He always put aside time to talk to her and the kits.

She nodded, and he smiled, and walked off. Dawnclaw sat, and began to delicately wash her paw. A friendly 'pirrup!' interrupted her.

Dawnclaw turned her head, and greeted her friend, Mallowheart.

"Dawnclaw! We never talk anymore, not since you had your kits." Mallowheart meowed, her gray and white fur was fluffed up against the leaf-fall chill.

Dawnclaw sighed.
"I know. But in two moons they'll be apprentices."

"I still don't understand why you had kits so young in the first place, you'd only been a warrior for what, six moons or something? Why would you do that? I mean, you were finally a warrior, for StarClan's sake. And you threw it all away! I mean, life will never be the same without kits. Never. You never had the chance to live!" Mallowheart said dramatically.

Dawnclaw chuckled at her talkative friend.
"StarClan, you chatter more than a warbler! We've been over this, I love Pinetuft, and well, the kits weren't planned, but I love them all the same!"

Mallowheart smiled.
"I know. But you could've given them to another queen, or simply reabsorbed them."

"I suppose." Dawnclaw replied. "But I wouldn't want to. They're absolutely perfect." She said.

"I don't mean to interrupt you two, but may I speak to you for a moment, Dawnclaw?" A voice meowed.

Dawnclaw turned, startled, but she relaxed at the familiar face of Swiftear.

"Oh, Swiftear, you surprised me!" Dawnclaw exclaimed, her usual grin returning.

"Of course you can. You sound worried, what's wrong?" She asked.

"Come into my den, there are some things... we need to discuss." He flicked an ear.

Dawnclaw exchanged a confused look with Mallowheart, before shrugging, and standing up. Shaking her dilute tortoiseshell fur, she

began trotting off after him.

She followed Swiftear into his den, squeezing under the hole in the maple tree. She had noted that the maple trees had began to lose their leaves. She didn't often find herself in the medicine den, and after the moons in the spacious nursery, the small medicine den felt cramped.

"Sit down." Swiftear gestured, turning around and sitting on a small nest of moss.

Dawnclaw followed suit, anxiety beginning to claw at her chest. *What was Swiftear going to say? Is it about the kits? Is it about Sablekit?*

"Well, Dawnclaw, you're an attentive queen, you must've noticed something by now." Swiftear launched into it, stopping to swallow. In those few moments, Dawnclaw became hyperaware of two things - the beating of her heart, and the fact that she didn't want to hear what was coming next.

"No.. Sablekit's fine! He's different to other kits, there's nothing wrong with him, you fool, nothing!" Dawnclaw spat, her fury fueled by terror of whatever was wrong with Sablekit.

Swiftear recoiled, his ears pinned against his wide head.

"Dawnclaw, calm down. You've obviously noticed, from that reaction. I know that you don't want to hear it, no queen wants to know that their kit isn't normal, but I'm sorry to tell you this, but something is clearly wrong with Sablekit."

With those words, devastation trickled down Dawnclaw's spine, sinking her into the ground. She melted, a mere puddle at Swiftear's paws. She soaked through the earth, her fears drifting her further down.

"No.. No, Swiftear, no!" She howled. A haze of emotion blinded her, she wanted to slice Swiftear into otter-dust. She sunk her claws into the earth, and she barely noticed her quivering.

"I don't know what he has. But he definitely has some kind of

mental disorder.. perhaps a personality disorder? I was thinking perhaps a Sociopath. But to show these symptoms so young? It's strange... I just don't know what's wrong with him.." Swiftear continued to drone on, but Dawnclaw couldn't hear him.

Her ears were ringing harshly, her quivering had turned to full out shaking. The tang of salty tears and a raw throat began to burn, and she continued melting, sinking slowly in her own disbelief, horror and dismay.

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A/N

Fact Of The Chapter: The territory is a combination of both Boreal Forest, and Taiga, with a mix of coniferous and deciduous trees; Maple, Fir, Spruce, Larch, Elm, and Oak, Pine, Birch, Aspen, Willow and Rowan.

Chapter Three

•◇•

One Breeds Love, The Other, Hate"

•◇•

Dawnclaw opened her eyes against the harsh wind that whistled through the trees, sending the branches into a frenzied dance.

She sighed.

It was hard now. She had been denying it for moons, but now she had to accept it. Her kit wasn't normal.

She tried to think of him in the same way. She tried not to think of him differently. But it was hard.

She tried not to look at him in disgust. But sometimes she felt it in her gaze, and it made her want to howl. It wasn't Sablekit's fault. Whatever he was, she owed it to him to be kind. But she couldn't help it.

Knowing that he wasn't perfect.. That he was.. He was wrong, a mistake!

No ! I mustn't think that . He is not wrong , nor is he a mistake . He is still my precious kit . It's not his fault he is this way . In fact , no one knows what he is . I cannot blame him , or think any less of him , for this .

"Dawnclaw."

She turned around, her fur fluffed against the wind. It buffeted slightly, the grey and cream fur distracted her.

She saw a black tabby, an average -sized tom standing. He appeared rather regal, she felt on edge by his presence.

"Snakestar.. what are you doing so far from camp?" She asked, not making eye contact with the tom.

He stepped forward, his paws crackling the leaves that carpeted the ground.

"I could ask you the same question." He said.

His sentences, she knew, were always sharp, and short, usually carrying an impact. But it was rather unsettling to listen to.

She noticed a small spider spinning a web, and shuffled her paws uncomfortably.

"It's Sablekit." Snakestar broke the silence. The words echoed, they carried around the cavern in her head.

Dawnclaw raised her amber eyes to his, before quickly averting them. His eyes were green, not blazing with fire, but deadly calm, like ice. She could see why he was named 'Snake'. He had the appearance of one about to strike, poised and careful.

"Yes." Her voice was quiet and cracked, as if admitting to it was shameful, which, in a way, it was.

He gave her a long, measured look.
"I understand you." He said quietly.

Dawnclaw's eyes widened, that wasn't the answer that she had been expecting.

"I mean, you had big hopes and dreams for your kits. And look at Sablekit. He wrecked them. He has a mental illness, or some sort of disorder, one that will affect him, and in doing so, ruin you image of a perfect kit. One he couldn't possibly control. How disgraceful on his part." Snakestar's voice was mild, and calm, but poison lurked behind his words. It sprayed in the air, hitting Dawnclaw, drenching her in it's oil-like substance.

Her bones eroded, leaving her skin hanging off a vacant skeleton. Dawnclaw's eyes were splashed in acidic words, they liquidized, leaving an empty socket. Her deliquescent eyes merged into her

filthy, matted fur, mixing with the blood that was still oozing from her wounds. Dawnclaw's heart beat painfully inside her sunken chest, it was swollen and raw.

She took in a deep breath, daring to look the tom in the eyes. He blinked at her, knowing the damage his words had done. He was ashamed that she could be so shallow, she could see that by looking. And he was right to feel that way.

"I will be." She said. To the outside ear, perhaps even to someone who was knowledgeable to the situation, her words made no sense. But to Snakestar, they carried an impact, a meaning, one which Dawnclaw was trying to express. An apology, an explanation, *a promise.*. and he understood.

Snakestar merely nodded, and turned, leaving Dawnclaw to piece herself back together.

•◇•

A day had passed since her talk with Snakestar, and Dawnclaw had found that she had an unusual state of lethargy. She had spent the majority of the morning in her nest, leaving only once to drink. She was alone in the nursery; her kits were outside. She could hear their squeals and giggles, but instead of being reassuring, Dawnclaw wanted to shut it all out.

She dozed off after a while, and woke to noises outside. With a sigh, she pushed herself to her paws. She trudged out of her den.

Blinking in the weak sunlight, she peered at the commotion taking place in the center of camp. A wiry brown she-cat was standing with Swallowpelt. Her body was standing almost idly, but her eyes flickered around with undisguised curiosity.

Snakestar was standing in front of her, and Dawnclaw crept closer to hear, suddenly intrigued.

"So, you are a what, exactly? Your words are strange." She heard her leader say, and the she-cat's dark, copper eyes sparked in amusement.

"Well aren't you primitive?" She remarked, and Dawnclaw flicked an ear. What in the name of StarClan was primitive?

"I am what you would call a wanderess, a cat consumed by wanderlust. That's what I'm searching for."

Dawnclaw stared at the she-cat. She used words that Dawnclaw and her clanmates had never heard before.

Snakestar was looking at the brown cat in awe.
"Would you mind speaking time in private?" He asked.

"Of course." She said. Her words, and slight dip of the head, were respectful, but her voice didn't quite match that.

The two walked away,and Pinetuft walked towards Dawnclaw. She watched the easy smile on the tom's face, and guilt weighed her down. She didn't want to tell him about Sablekit, but she knew she needed to. But how?

"What do you think of the rogue?" He asked her.

She tilted her head, how could she explain the fascination she felt towards the strange new cat?

"She's very.. She's very... unusual." Dawnclaw meowed, unsure of how to get her words out. But Pinetuft would understand. He knew her.

"I'm worried, myself. Apparently she was just found on our territory. She wasn't surprised when she was told that she was trespassing, she merely asked to see our leader." He said, his pale yellow eyes gleaming.

The two talked for a while, enjoying the time they and together. Dawnclaw told Pinetuft that she had been sick; that was the reason she had been in such low spirits. She knew he didn't believe her, but she was happy that he didn't press her.

She noticed the shape of two felines emerge from a small den, both angular and narrow.

Snakestar leapt upon a tree stump, and called the familiar call.

"All cats old enough to climb the High Spruce, gather before me to hear my words."

Dawnclaw walked over to him, as did Pinetuft.

"I have spoken with our guest. She will be staying for a while -" His words were interrupted by protesting wails. SpruceClan were traditionalists, they did not allow strangers!

"Silence!" Spat Snakestar.
"She will not harm us!"

A grey she-cat, Stormthroat, Pinetuft's sibling, stood up, her eyes blazing with insolent rage.

"She's an outsider! She cannot be here! Who knows what she would do with the knowledge she learns when she returns to wherever she comes from? Steal our way of living? Adapt it? Make it her own?"

Stormthroat was very persuasive; it was what she was named after. Other cats were nodding in agreement with her.

The brown she-cat let let a snort, and exchanged a look with Snakestar. He jumped off the stump, and she jumped on.

"My name is Aquiver." She spoke clearly, her voice was rather low, and deep.

"It means to be quivering, or trembling. You see, at birth, we are named after a word that represents our future, or our personality. Our Ulna, a seer, what you would call a medicine cat, names us. They look inside us, and our ancestors present them with a fitting name." She stared hard at Stormthroat, who wilted under the other cat's gaze.

"I too live with a group of cats. We live, fight and hunt together, though it is rare that we fight. We are similar to you, in that respect, however we are not bound to a code. We don't go as we please though. We have self control, self restraint, and morality. We have rules for ourselves, but we don't force ourselves to obey them.

We learn. If a cat doesn't agree with our lifestyle, if knowledge, or bravery, or kindness is not what their purpose is, than they are not forced to stay with us. Freedom and acceptance is one of our values." She paused.

Dawnclaw was enthralled. This cat seemed.. ethereal. A beauty unlike one Dawnclaw had seen before. The way she looked, the way she acted.. She was perfect.

"Once we have reached a certain level of maturity and knowledge, we leave on a journey. On this journey, we have twelve moons. We travel, and gain knowledge. New knowledge. So far, I have learnt of many things, and in five moons, I will return to my home. The purpose of the journey is to learn, of course. And learn, I have. And I will. But it is also to find ourselves, to experience and grow as a cat. And I have. When I return, I will share my knowledge, as the City that value knowledge is the City that I have chosen."

The molly took in a large breath, and silence gripped the camp. This stranger was incomprehensible.

"I am currently 20 moons old. Young, I know, but I was aged enough to go."

She turned to look around at the SpruceClan cats.

"Discussion over. You know of my lifestyle... And soon I will experience yours." She said, her voice low. In a delicate motion, she sprung off the stump.

•◇•

The sun was just beginning to set, and Dawnclaw was watching her kits. They were playing, as usual, and Sablekit was watching, as usual.

Dawnclaw walked lightly over to the black furred kit, with an unnatural smile on her face.

"Sablekit? Let's go and play with your littermates." She mewed gently.

Sablekit swung his head around sharply, and let out a loud "No!"

Surprise flared in Dawnclaw's chest, but she was not to be deterred.

"Come on Sablekit. Why not? Why don't you want to play with the other kits?" She asked, in the same gentle tone.

"B-because I don't want to!" He howled, and turned away from her.

Dawnclaw was shocked at his unexplained irritability.

She looked up, making eye contact with Aquiver.

There was a curious look in the she-cat's copper gaze, replaced by that of glassy understanding. The little cat stood, and walked into the medicine den, leaving Dawnclaw staring after her in dread.

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A/N

A longer chapter this time! I'll definitely write a book featuring Aquiver, I feel in love with her while writing this.

Who's your current favourite character?
Not many have been introduced yet, but mine's Aquiver lmao.

Fact Of The Chapter: Dawnclaw and her sister, Minkfoot, have never gotten on well. At all. The two try to avoid speaking to each other at all costs.

~ Blackbird

Chapter Four

•◇•

The Wasted Years, The Wasted Youth

•◇•

Dawnclaw watched the receding form of Aquiver. The she-cat didn't return.

Cats were starting to get ready for the nightly patrols, and Dawnclaw looked at her kits. It had been a long day for them, they needed a sleep.

"Come on little ones. It's time to sleep." She said quietly.

"Do we have to?" Meadowkit whined.

Maplekit took this without question, she already began walking back to the nursery.

Martenkit turned to Dawnclaw, her pale green eyes sparkling.

"Dawnclaw, can we eat first? I'm hungry!" She mewed, her voice as bouncy as usual.

It felt good to have some normality.

"Yeah, can we? I'm almost starved!" Coyotekit said dramatically.

Dawnclaw purred, her second eldest kit was proving to be quite the dramatist.

"Of course you may have some fresh kill. Go and fetch it from the fresh kill pile." She told them, and the two let out a cheer, and them raced off, followed quickly by Meadowkit.

Maplekit had already walked into the den, as did Sablekit.

Meadowkit and Coyotekit came back carrying a vole, and Martenkit

was dragging a whitefish.

Dawnclaw helped Martenkit by picking the fish up gently in her jaws, and took it into the nursery.

She and her kits shared their prey, but to Dawnclaw, the few mouthfuls of whitefish tasted like dust. She pushed it to one side, where it was eaten along with the vole.

"Come on, kits. Let's sleep now." She said when they finished.

The kits were full, and happily obliged.

"What do you guys think about Aquiver?" Meadowkit asked suddenly.

Dawnclaw flicked an ear, it would be interesting to hear what the kits thought.

"Well, I don't think she should be here! She's not a Clan cat!" Squeaked Coyotekit.

Sablekit made no noise, he just turned over in his nest.

Martenkit sat up, her brown tabby fur nearly indistinguishable from the bark den encasing the cats. "I think she should be able to visit for a day or two... but not for long." The little kit mewed, her voice unusually serious.

"She should be able to stay as long as she likes." The small voice of Maplekit said. Her voice was a medium pitch, but the serious tone really presented itself. "Everyone's saying that she shouldn't be here because it's against our rules, as tradition states that we do not allow outsiders. But her rules, her tradition states that she is to learn as many new things as she can, and being here is a great opportunity for her. So what right do we have say that our rules are more important than hers?"

Dawnclaw stared at Maplekit in amazement. Her kit showed greater wisdom than some of the warriors!

And she's right. Our customs and her customs don't meet up. But we

cannot say that ours are more important.

"And we could learn a lot from her." Maplekit continued, her gray and cream fur had a silver glow, cast from the faint moonlight that was radiating into the den.

Coyotekit scoffed. "Obviously our rules are more important than hers. She's sheltering with us, so what we say goes!"

"Coyotekit's right. And of course our values are more important than hers. Great StarClan, she's just some weird rogue." Meadowkit rolled her eyes, a gesture she had picked up from Fishpaw.

Maplekit twirled around, her fur bristling and her tail lashing.

"How can you be so shallow?! You're all so pathet -" She was broke off mid snarl by Dawnclaw.

"Maplekit, don't speak to your littermates like that. They think differently." She said soothingly. Dawnclaw turned to Meodowkit and Coyotekit.

"There is no right or wrong when it comes to this subject. It all comes down to what we believe in." She told them.

Meadowkit snorted and lay down again, and Coyotekit nodded, than did the same.

"Well, I don't care. Snakestar will sort it out, so I don't need to think about it." Martenkit said with a note of finality.

Maplekit narrowed her eyes. "You're all ridiculous." She said with contempt, but she didn't follow it up.

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Dawnclaw was awoken by a paw shaking her.

"What? No I don't need to patrol!" She gasped, still half asleep. The other cat swam into focus, and Dawnclaw felt dismay edge her chest as she saw that it was Swiftear.

"Dawnclaw, we need to talk." He said.

Dawnclaw felt her chest collapse. Her ribs cracked as her heart crashed against them.

"Alright." Her voice came out strangled and scared, and Swiftear rested his tail across her shoulders and flashed her a sympathetic glance.

He led her to the medicine den, and she immediately felt claustrophobic. And then she noticed a small, dark brown she-cat. Aquiver.

The cat stood, and her copper eyes looked neutral, and emotionless. "Let's go. Close to your camp, we can discuss." Aquiver said. Her voice was rich, as deep and dark as a flowing river.

The trio walked outside camp, they got a few curious glances. SpruceClan's only queen, the medicine cat, and the new loner.

They walked through the shaded forest, Dawnclaw noted a few drifting leaves.

"Here would be a good place." Swiftear said.

Aquiver sat down,not with grace but heavily. She wrapped her tail around her paws, and Swiftear sat beside her.

Dawnclaw, always being one to cut straight to the point, sat down and immediately launched into it.

"What do you want to discuss? It's about Sablekit, isn't it?" She dug her claws into the ground nervously.

"Yes. It is" Swiftear told her. He glanced at Aquiver, and she dipped her head.

"Well, I was observing your camp yesterday, I noticed that Sablekit's behaviour was different to other kits."
Aquiver began speaking.

Dawnclaw winced.

"I remembered something a recent learning that a cat, named Kalon, discovered. On his journey, he met a group of barn cats. He spoke with them, and noticed a young cat, must've been around ten moons, acted differently. They explained that he had a mental disorder known as Reactive Attachment Disorder. This is what Sablekit has."

Dawnclaw let out a whimper as the sky faded. It was hollow, pale, all light was ebbing like a dying tide. The world faded until she was just a speck, a speck of dust consumed in a raging hurricane of grief, grief for herself and grief for her kit.

"No." Dawnclaw rasped.
"No. Please.. No."

Dawnclaw felt a wail rising in her throat, it emerged slowly, and gutteral.

Aquiver silenced her with a wave of her tail, her eyes unsympathetic.

"Listen. There is treatment. He can be... Almost healthy." She said.

Colour leaked into Dawnclaw's world, relief swirled in the form of wind,blowing and brushing her fur, swirling her off her feet.

"You mean.. He can be.. Normal?" She whispered, her words uttered, they felt forbidden.

Aquiver's eyes narrowed, and she lashed her tail.
"Your goal should not be for him to be "normal". In fact, if you ask me, normality is a mere illusion. But, in the term you're speaking, it is possible, maybe even likely, that he will be... Mentally healthy. As long as he gets help,and treatment. However, you should not aim for this. You should aim for his happiness. Obviously, having a mental illness or a mental disorder is not to be desired, but do not make it become all that he is. His happiness is all that matters. " Aquiver's tone was harsh, but her eyes were gentle.

Dawnclaw nodded, she was in a state of shock, unable to do anything else.

Swiftear got up, a sad smile on his face.

"We can discuss more later." He meowed, his pale yellow eyes blinking. With a flick of his ear, he walked away.

Aquiver dipped her head to Dawnclaw, her expression complex. It was unreadable, but not emotionless.

"You'll find support. Don't worry. Make sure to tell Pinetuft." She gave a rueful smile, and then followed Swiftear, leaving Dawnclaw in a state of devastation.

———

A/N

I'm really enjoying writing this!

Fact Of The Chapter: Dawnclaw is heteroromantic bisexual, meaning she is romantically attracted to the opposite gender, and sexually attracted to two.

Chapter Five

•◇•

“ Question Good, And Question Bad”

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"But... But. He can be treated, right?" The brown tabby mumbled.

"Apparently." Dawnclaw answered.
"I'll have to talk it over with Swiftear. And Aquiver too, I guess."

Pinetuft looked at her; his eyes pained.
"Well, this wasn't what we were expecting. But we wanted kits. So we have to be the best parents we can be, we owe that to them." He said.

Dawnclaw cast him an affectionate look. This was the cat that she fell in love with.

"Pinetuft, you're a natural parent. Me? Not so much. I wanted perfect kits, in fact I didn't even want kits in the first place!" She laughed slightly, but it wasn't really joyful.
"I wouldn't change anything. But I just.. I'm not a good mother! I'm destined to be a warrior, hunting and fighting for SpruceClan. Not taking care of kits! I'm just not naturally good at that kind of thing. And I.."

Shame welled up inside her; it bobbed like a boat.

Pinetuft looked at her, care in his gaze.
"You've done the best you can. You've been an excellent mother, you really have been."

She shook her head, her eyes glittering with tears.

"No, I haven't! It's okay to admit it. I talked to Aquiver, and she.. she said that kits weren't born with this.. disorder. Kits develop it because of... neglect. And it's my fault. I never cared for his

emotional needs because of the other kits and now look what I've done to him!"

She burst into sobs; they shook her body. She didn't dare to look at Pinetuft.

He was silent for a while.

Pinetuft wrapped his tail around her.
"Shhh. It's okay. You didn't mean to. It's okay. Five kits is a lot to handle, and you're only young. It was a mistake. We can fix it." He whispered reassuring words to her.

It wasn't okay.
And they both knew it.

•◇•

Dawnclaw sat in camp, watching the wind blow. A few leaves scattered here and there, but the territory was mainly evergreen.

The dark green was usually comforting, but Dawnclaw didn't think anything could help her now.

It was too much.

She'd failed her kit. As a mother, she'd sworn to protect them all from harm. She'd only caused more.

She dug her claws into the ground. She couldn't stay here. She simply couldn't.

She got up, and began walking, her head ringing.

You're a useless mother .

She walked faster.

You may have ruined him forever .

She began to trot, the movement was bouncy and disruptive.

Maybe you should just die . Die , because of what you've done .

She broke into a run, her paws thumping loudly against the ground, her fur blowing being her.

Pathetic coward .

She shook her head. Thoughts like this weren't going to help her son. She was being overdramatic, there was hope for him.

Dawnclaw pricked her ears at the sound of talking.

"Really? Wow."

"I know. It's odd, isn't it? "

She recognised the scents of Minkfoot and Waspwhisker.

Her sister and her sister's mate.

Waspwhisker spotted her first.
"Dawnclaw! How are you?" He asked.

Minkfoot scowled at her sister.

"I'm.. I'm good." She mumbled.
"You?"

"Perfectly fine! Say, would you like to join us? Minkfoot and I were talking about how Duckflight seems to have her eyes on a new tom now that Lynxheart has retired to the elder's den. Apparently this tom had his eyes on her for a while, and the moment Lynxheart was out of the way, he crept in!"

Dawnclaw scowled. She was never one for gossip. That was more Mallowheart's sort of thing.

"Well, who's the tom?" She couldn't help feeling a little bit curious.

"That's the thing. No one knows." Waspwhisker said.

Dawnclaw nodded.
"Well, thanks for the offer, but I best be on my way."

"Alright." Waspwhisker replied, politely.

•◇•

Dawnclaw awoke as the sky was lightening, the midnight blue melted into a pale, purple-gray.

Her yellow eyes blinked as processed what she was seeing.

"Deerpaw?" Her mew was hoarse, scratching at the corners of her throat.

The small shape in front of her shuffled his paws, his expression one of awkwardness.

Dawnclaw was very familiar with the mannerisms and personalities of her sister's kits. Fishpaw was materialistic, a superficial extrovert. She almost reminded Dawnclaw of herself, though she hoped she didn't appear all that shallow. Deerpaw, on the other whisker, was awkward, quiet, preferring to know the reasoning than the actual task.

"Sorry to wake you, Dawnclaw." He mumbled, amber eyes fixed on his paws.

"It's no problem. What is it?" She asked, blinking slowly.

"I'm not sure, I was told to fetch you by Swiftear." The cream furred tabby answered.

Horror flushed through Dawnclaw, racing to her cheeks and through her bloodstream. She kept out an outraged hiss, and spat a furious
"What does he want now?!"

Deerpaw recoiled, anxiety clear on his face.

"Sorry. Don't blame the messenger." Dawnclaw muttered, ashamed of herself.

I really am a terrible mother .

I'm terrible with young cats in general .

Even though I am young .

She stood, and Deerpaw fled, walking quickly back to his den.

Poor little cat .

Dawnclaw began to walk out of her den, she barely looked back at her small, sleeping kits.

She sighed.

And continued.

The ground underfoot was mainly dirt, twig and grass, with a few scattered leaves. They crinkled, and she flinched at the sound.

She walked into the medicine den, it was now familiar.

She was greeted by the sight of Swiftear, but only his white patches were visible. If Dawnclaw had've been her usual state, she would've found it funny.

"Hello, Dawnclaw. I expect you know why you're here." He meowed.

His formal tone was enough.
His controlled emotions was enough.
His unexpressive face was enough.

Dawnclaw snapped.
Hurt and blame swelled inside her like a sick tide, overflowing and pouring out of her mouth. It cascaded down her chin, wetting her chest fur, and spreading out on the ground. Her words drowned those who it hurt; they lapped at her paws. She was untouchable.

"Swiftear, you vile piece of lemming dung! You're nothing, a mindless, cruel, creature of the Dark Forest. You deserve to go there, to rot and burn! Your body will decompose and your empty skeleton will lie there, disregarded by everyone because everyone hates you! And your disgusting, horrendous spirit will be tied to it, and you will never be free! You deserve to be filled with eternal pain, shrieking in agony, but silently, so you don't do any further

bother to everyone around you. You're a pile of -"

"Dawnclaw, enough! You're in a state of hysteria!" Swiftear interrupted, more than quite alarmed. And indeed she was.

"Why did you do this to me?" She howled, digging her claws into the dirt.

"Dawnclaw, please." He begged.
"You'll wake the whole Clan."

"And they'll find out just how pathetic you are!" She moaned, swiping at the air.

"Dawnclaw."

The voice broke through the glass that had formed in her mind. It shattered, spreading over her thoughts, disrupting her dysfunctional thinking, cutting into her brain. Blood ran as she stared in disbelief at what she had done.

The voice wasn't painful. The voice was anything but.

Aquiver's voice was deep, and low-pitched. It was soulful, and reassuring.

"I'm sorry!" She burst out, sobs coming from within her chest. Swiftear didn't move, he was still shocked at what Dawnclaw had said.

Aquiver walked towards the crying cat, and gently reached out with her tail.

"I dislike physical contact. But don't worry, Dawnclaw. You're grieving. Grieving for your old life. Blame and anger are two of the stages."

_____

A/N

What did you guys think? It was a real struggle to write this chapter, I just read two reAlly good books and I'm so jealous of

their writing styles.

Fact Of The Chapter: Deerpaw has social anxiety disorder.

Chapter Six

•◇•

"But I Believe In Divinity "

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"Okay, Dawnclaw, so Aquiver has been talking to me about possible treatment options for Sablekit." Swiftear said nervously. He still looked anxious from her outburst, and Dawnclaw felt guilt deep inside her chest, like a spiderweb.

"Yes..." Dawnclaw said warily. Her emotions were still running high, she didn't trust herself to not burst again.

"Aquiver is very well educated on this subject." Swiftear said, admiration flowed from his mouth like honey, Dawnclaw felt it drip onto her fur, sweet but oh so sickly. Swiftear's dark green eyes shone with marvel, and Dawnclaw bared her teeth.

She looked up and met the intense gaze of the she-cat, her copper eyes were scintillating.

"After Kalor found these barn cats, he found out as much about the disorder as he could. It turns out, there are two types. Sablekit has the inhibited type, as did the young molly who had the disorder." Aquiver paused, letting Dawnclaw process what she had said.

"There are many treatment opinions, however the best opinions that Swiftear and I decided on are play therapy, family therapy, and special sessions for you, Dawnclaw, where you learn to do what's best for him. Individual psychological counselling would also be effective." The little cat said.

Dawnclaw cocked her head. What did all of those words mean?

Picking up on her stupefaction, Aquiver began to explain.

"Play therapy would be getting Sablekit to play games on his own,

and eventually move him on to playing with other kits. It will help him become more comfortable around others, and teach him how to appropriately interact with others. This will help him learn the social skills he needs." Aquiver told Dawnclaw. Her expression was warm, but guarded.

"I understand that." Dawnclaw replied. "But who would be with him?" She asked, feeling quite stupid.

However, Aquiver looked brighter at the question, she seemed encouraged, as if Dawnclaw was finally beginning to understand, and engage in her son.

"I would, as I am knowledgeable about the treatment methods. You would be included in some, but not all. When you are there, for play therapy, the majority of the time you would be observing. I don't want you very involved in play therapy for a little while at first, simply because you were a major factor of why he developed he disorder." Aquiver spoke gently, but her last words hit a nerve in Dawnclaw, and she sunk her claws into the dirt, as her body broke in half, and slowly joined back together.

"Family therapy, however, is different, where it is necessary for Sablekit, you, and Pinetuft to autopilot in positive, rewarding activities to help him connect with you both. His siblings too, will come, but not to all of them. In fact, you and Pinetuft can alternate." Aquiver went on relentlessly, ignoring or was unaware of the emotional conflict going on inside Dawnclaw's head.

Dawnclaw was experiencing defeatism. Her body was on fire, a raging mess of anger and blame and self pity. But now she was living on emptiness, air and acceptance. Her body worked on auto-pilot, her mind floating in unpleasant thoughts of what she had been responsible of, and what the future would hold. Pinetuft had been accepting, but once he knew the full extent, how would he react?

"Dawnclaw, your sessions would be with me, Swiftear, and Pinetuft. You both need to learn about Sablekit's disorder together, and know how to support him in the future." Aquiver continued. Dawnclaw tried to clear her mind, and listen to the she-cat.

"And that leaves individual psychological counselling. This would be between Swiftear and Sablekit. The two would talk, try and form a connection. It would help us get inside Sablekit's head, learn what's going on inside him, and how to move forward. Swiftear would share what he learns of Sablekit with me, you, Pinetuft, and Snakestar. However, the session itself is strictly between the two. If there are other presences, he may feel anxious and become more withdrawn, and refuse to say anything. Also, I won't be around forever, and you and Pinetuft were directly involved with his upbringing, and contribute to why he developed this disorder."

Dawnclaw noticed that Aquiver had repeated herself. A mistake, or was she trying to drill a message into Dawnclaw's head?

"That's all we need to discuss for the moment, I'll leave you to process what you have learned. Our first session will be with Swiftear, you, Pinetuft, Sablekit and I, where we will give him a few tests, so we know for sure that this is what he has. If he definitely has the disorder, we will have our first session of family therapy, where we will inform and explain to Sablekit and his siblings what he has, and how to support him."

Aquiver then dropped her professional manner.

"Now, I'm needed on my first border patrol!" She gave a little skip of excitement, and bounded out of the den.

Swiftear watched her go, and turned back to Dawnclaw.

"She's a great cat, isn't she?" He mewed fondly. Dawnclaw distinguished an emotion in his eyes. It was love!

"Swiftear, do you love her?!" Dawnclaw burst out, her voice alarmed.

Swiftear stared at her, and then laughed.

"StarClan, no! She's only twenty moons, and my littermate is an elder, for StarClan's sake! That age gap is atrocious. I admit, I have become fond of her in the past few sunrises. She has been very helpful, and is full of personality. No, I love her, but not the way

that you think. I see her as a daughter, almost."

Relief washed over Dawnclaw, smoothing down her horror. But at the mention of 'daughter', she flinched slightly.

"You'd better go, the moon has long risen. You don't want to worry your kits." Swiftear dismissed her.

"Of course." Dawnclaw said, and hurried out of the den, her grey paws landing heavily on the grass, flattening it.

A/N

I found some interesting information about RAD that I didn't know, so that's great!

Fact Of The Chapter: Swiftear has crushed on two cats before, (Fernface [deceased] and Cherrystream.) However because he is a loyal medicine cat, (Wow, so rare) he didn't act on his feelings.

Chapter Seven

[image]

•◇•

Give Me Love, Give Me Dreams, Give Me A Good Self Esteem"

•◇•

Two sunrises had passed, and Dawnclaw was watching her kits, anxiety eroding her insides. Sablekit's official diagnosis was currently happening.

She watched her kit's with half-lidded eyes as they interacted with each other. She gave a sigh as she observed the differences between Sablekit and his siblings.

How could I have believed the lies I told myself? It's so obvious that he's not normal.

"Martenkit, catch it, catch it, catch it!" Coyotekit screeched. A small ball of moss had been flung high in the air, right over Meadowkit's head. The moss ball continued it's flight as Meadowkit leaped, missing it. It flew over Martenkit's head, and she charged after it, Meadowkit following. The ball landed close to where Sablekit and Maplekit was sitting.

Maplekit was examining a leaf, StarClan knows why.

She's an odd kit, but I don't think anything's wrong with her. She'll play if she deems the game 'stimulating enough'.

Sablekit was just watching, as per usual. Martenkit grabbed the moss ball between her paws, accidentally brushing her tail against Sablekit.

"Ouch." He mewed. His rarely-used voice was monotonous, and it was merely a brush of fur. Why would he say ouch?

"...a sign of the disorder." A low voice carried over from nearby, and

Dawnclaw turned he head sharply.

Aquiver and Swiftear! They were clearly discussing something.

As much as she didn't want to, Dawnclaw knew that she had to help them. It was for her son, after all.

She began to walk over to Maplekit and Sablekit.

"Hello Maplekit!" She said brightly.

The little kit looked up at her.
"Hi, Dawnclaw." She mewed.

"What are you doing?" Dawnclaw asked.

"Examining the differences between leaves from a willow tree, and leaves from a rowan." The little dilute tortoiseshell meowed, her voice serious.

Dawnclaw blinked.
"Alright." She said, trying to keep her surprise out of her tone.

She turned to Sablekit, and made eye contact with Aquiver. The she-cat smiled encouragingly.

"Hello Sablekit!" Dawnclaw said, equally as brightly as before.

"Hello." His voice was so quiet, it was barely audible. Dawnclaw watched Aquiver venture closer, while Swiftear hung back.

"What are you doing?" She asked, her voice cheerful, albeit fake.

"Nothing!" He hissed. The anger in his voice shocked Dawnclaw, as her son continued looking at the ground. He hasn't made eye contact with her once.

Dawnclaw saw Aquiver mouth something to Swiftear.

"Would you rather me leave you alone?" She asked.

"Yes." Sablekit growled.

"Alright." Dawnclaw said, beginning to step back.

"Don't be so grumpy." Maplekit said to her littermate, her tone disapproving.

"Leave me alone!" He spat, digging his claws into the dirt.

Maplekit glared at him, but said no more. Dawnclaw walked over to Aquiver.

"Should I get Pinetuft to talk to him now?" She asked.

The dark brown molly nodded. Hearing his name, Pinetuft walked over.

"What do you need me to do?" He asked, resolve in his tone. He had been waiting for when he would be needed.

"Talk to Sablekit." Aquiver said, authority clear in her voice.

Dawnclaw watched her mate and kit converse, unable to hear anything due to Sablekit's quiet voice, and Pinetuft's soft-spoken mew.

"He barely said anything to me. Just short sharp answers and then he stopped talking all together." Pinetuft reported when he was done.

"Okay. Now we need to move on to the next stages of testing. I've already ruled out any depressive disorders, intellectual disabilities, adjustment disorders, and he's not on the autistic spectrum."

All of these words were new and confusing to Dawnclaw, but now wasn't the time to ask.

"So, we've covered the first parts. Now, I need to ask you how his behaviour has been since he was born. When did his personality become like this?"

Dawnclaw, to her surprise, couldn't place it. Despite the fact that she spend a lot of time around him, she really had no idea.

"I noticed something was unusual when he was around two moons.. And a half.." Pinetuft said, cautiously.

Aquiver visibly brightened.

"Details."

"Well," Pinetuft began, looking uncomfortable. "I noticed he was shy before, he didn't seem to openly seek attention. I think it developed slowly over time, but I noticed that he was slowly withdrawing from the other kits, and one time, despite being openly distressed, he didn't seek comfort, even though I was near. He didn't beg for milk, in fact he rarely spoke to Dawnclaw. And he stopped being excited whenever I was able to talk to him. He didn't run up to me like he used to. He also didn't smile, he seemed sad almost, for no reason."

"That was very helpful, Pinetuft. Thank you. You're a rather observant cat." Swiftear broke in, and Pinetuft looked embarrassed, but pleased.

Shame lapped around Dawnclaw's paws.

These are things that I should've known .

Aquiver's copper eyes flashed as she turned to Dawnclaw.

"Dawnclaw, you generally spend a lot of time around your kits. How does Sablekit interact around them?" She asked.

Dawnclaw felt that anxiety from before transform into a tornado, swirling around in her gut. All her instincts were telling her to lie, to say that Sablekit was interacting fine with the others. But she knew that if she wanted to help her kit, she would have to do this. She couldn't protect him. She needed to aid him in his recovery.

"He.. he is around them a lot. Follows them. Watches them. He never joins in. He has a certain anger around Maplekit." She answered.

Aquiver's eyes widened. Dawnclaw caught a flash of how dark, and beautiful the she-cat's eyes were. Deep in colour, and they seemed

to almost have some flecks of gold.

"Of course. Maplekit has the same fur colour as you." Aquiver said.

The weight of what Aquiver had said rippled throughout Dawnclaw. The amount of damage she had done to her kit by ignoring his emotional needs was terrible. They would run through him for a long time, maybe even forever. Deep wounds that would take a lot to heal.

Dawnclaw didn't know how she kept breathing. Realising that she had broken her kit was an enormous weight. Guilt and shame, exhaustion and horror, self pity and self disgust lay on her back. Her spine snapped, breaking and twisting underneath it all. Hitting the ground, her body decayed, leaving only that spine, that StarClan forsaken spine, all twisted into a strange shape. Deep lines carved into it, lacerations lined it. Mutated into a monster, she saw herself in that spine, and that hurt Dawnclaw the most.

She didn't know how she kept breathing.

"Sablekit... He just doesn't talk to the others..he seems so detached. He is irritable, he snaps."

Aquiver nodded slowly.

"Can you elaborate?" She asked.

A memory resurfaced in Dawnclaw's mind.

"Martenkit.. she's so optimistic, so full of joy, of bounce. She was curious, why didn't her littermate want to play with her and the others? She asked him, in the sweetest way some kit's do. She asked, 'Sablekit, you never play. You never join in, and never talk to us. Why? Do you hate us?' She said the last sentence so.. sadly. It was heart breaking to hear. This happened, what, a sunrise ago? It killed me inside to hear her say that.. she doesn't understand, she thought it might've been her fault! He didn't care about the clear sadness in her voice, he just said 'I don't want to talk to you. Go away and stay away.' She looked so shocked, and when she went to touch him, he recoiled in fear. In fear!" Dawnclaw felt her voice

rising, and fought to control herself.

"Thank you.. " Aquiver meowed.

"What's he like with other cats who aren't his kin?"

Dawnclaw watched a small breeze ruffle her fur, she watched it waver.

"He is very distrustful, rather fearful. Doesn't speak. In fact, Lynxheart, an elder, asked me if he was mute!"

"I see.. Okay, let's move on. We've already covered examples of his behavior in a variety of situations.. I know your parenting style, I've been watching. I've already asked you about living situation since birth. Right, we're done! I'll get the results back to you as soon as I can." Aquiver smiled, and Dawnclaw felt exhaustion grip her, and she watched as the brown she-cat began to walk away.

A/N

I apologize for how disgusting this turned out, if I want to be a psychologist, I'd better improve my diagnosing process skills :(

I cut this short because it was dragging, and ugh. This was just a terrible chapter overall.

From the (very) limited resources that I found, this is the diagnosis process for RAD:

Fact Of The Chapter: Dawnclaw's mother is called Tawnymask, and her father, Poplarpelt, who is an elder, and also Snakestar's littermate.

Once again, I'm sorry for this shitty chapter, I promise it will be better :)

Chapter Eight

●◇●

"I Know Exactly Why I Walk And Talk Like A Machine."

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It's rather boring, being a queen. Dawnclaw thought to herself, as she lapped from a small puddle. It had rained that night, but had cleared up slightly.

The sky was grey, which annoyed Dawnclaw. It was a reminder that Leaf-bare was coming, and Dawnclaw preferred to forget her troubles. But she knew she couldn't do that about Sablekit.

It had been four sunrises since his diagnosis, and Dawnclaw was growing more nervous by the moment. She knew there was only a slight chance that he didn't have the disorder... but she couldn't help hoping all the same.

A small droplet of water hit her back. Dawnclaw didn't feel it due to her fur, but it was soon easy to see the raindrops that fell through the large trees.

The amber-eyed queen let out a hiss of disgust. SpruceClan cats hated the water. In fact, all three of the Clans did.

She began to run back to camp as the rain turned from drizzle to proper rain, her dilute tortoiseshell fur becoming wet quickly.

She arrived back at camp, running between the close group of spruce trees, which was how SpruceClan got their name.

She immediately ran into the shelter of the nursery, and was shocked at the sight of her clanmate, Brindlebee. The tortoiseshell cat was lying peacefully in the nursery.

"Brindlebee?"

The pretty cat looked up, her green eyes looked like large pools of

ivy.

"Hello Dawnclaw! Guess what? I'm your new denmate, Swallowpelt and I are expecting kits!"

The she-cat purred.

"Oh.. I.. congratulations!" Dawnclaw was shocked, but a part of her were happy. Brindlebee was going to be a much better denmate then Minkfoot had been. The problem would lie in Sablekit. Dawnclaw knew she would have to tell Brindlebee, how would the tortoiseshell react?

"Oh, I'm so happy! We've wanted kits for ages, and we finally got them! Oh, Swiftear was so happy about them, but he was concerned about the timing, Leaf-bare is approaching. Oh, but he's so nice with kits, isn't he? He's always helping you out. Really, I..."

Dawnclaw tuned out her friend's rambling, choosing to watch the small sleeping form of Meadowkit instead, watching her chest rise and fall.

"Dawnclaw." A low, and surprisingly cold voice interrupted Dawnclaw's thoughts.

Aquiver.

"Bring the kits." She said, her sentences short and sharp. Just with those words, Dawnclaw's heart sunk, slowly swirling to the bottom of her ribs, sinking between the cracks, and sliding down her spine, like a snail.

"And Pinetuft."

The brown she-cat stood back, watching as Dawnclaw stood, numbness clouding her brain.

Brindlebee flashed her a curious look, but Dawnclaw merely flicked an ear.

She rushed a tail over Meadowkit and Sablekit. They both woke, looking at her with questioning eyes. Well, Sablekit didn't look at

her at all, just behind her.

"Follow me." She breathed, and they obliged.

Martenkit, Coyotekit and Maplekit were outside, talking to their father.

Convenient, Dawnclaw thought.

"Guys.. we have to go." She said simply. With one look at Dawnclaw, and Pinetuft understood.

The seven followed Aquiver into the medicine den.

She sat down, Swiftear was already sitting. Dawnclaw and the others followed suit.

"Alright, everyone, you must be wondering why you're all here. Well, kits, Sablekit is different." Aquiver said, in an straight-forward manner.

Dawnclaw was shocked at Aquiver's manner, but bit her tongue, saying nothing. She risked a glance at Sablekit, but his eyes showed no emotion, he simply stared at the brown she-cat.

"I noticed. Swiftear noticed. Pinetuft noticed. Dawnclaw noticed. I'm sure you, kits, noticed too." Her sentences were short and sharp, and Dawnclaw's nerves were pulsating against her skin.

"We did a little test, to see what was wrong. Sablekit, you have something called Reactive Attachment Disorder. This disorder is stemming from the emotional neglect you received when you were younger. Dawnclaw never meant it to happen. But it did."

The kits knew what neglect was. Dawnclaw wasn't prepared for the expressions her kits wore as they turned to face her. Sadness, horror, anger, pity.. Her triangular ears pressed flat against her skull.

"This disorder means that Sablekit can't connect on an emotional level to you, his family. There are two types, and Sablekit has the inhibited type. This is why, Sablekit, that you don't smile. Why you

don't want to join in. Why you dislike, and don't understand touch. It's why you feel so isolated, and alone."

Aquiver's bright yellow eyes were staring straight at Sablekit's green ones, and Sablekit cracked.

His shell stripped off him, and Dawnclaw was rewarded with a fleeting glimpse of a broken kit, his interior raw and scared, and so alone. He was different and he knew it. And know he knew why. There was a reason he acted and felt this way.
He wasn't broken.
He had a disorder.

His shell reattached the moment it fell, but it was a moment that would remain in the cracks of Dawnclaw's mind.

"You mean I'm not a monster who can't feel?" The little kit whispered.

His words were a bitter rainfall of hope.

And Dawnclaw couldn't help it, she let out a sob. It was explosive, violent, and full of regret.

"I'm sorry!" She wailed. She was ready to unhinge her jaw and scream her woes to the sky, but Pinetuft silenced her, his tail stifling the words about to launch off her tongue.

"Dawnclaw, I know you're hurting, but today is about Sablekit, not you. Stop the self pity, and focus on him. Apologies can come later." He hissed, his eyes were beacons of concern, and Dawnclaw's throat melted.

Her unspoken words dripped in sour drops, slowly sliding down her throat, softly dripping into her stomach. Immediately, their acidic tang eroded her stomach lining, hiding in the inflamed flesh, never to rise again.

Dawnclaw nodded.

"Yes, Sablekit. You don't feel love because of a disorder. You're not a monster, Sablekit. You never were. You feel anger, and sadness

for no reason because of this. But guess what? We can make it go away. We can help you feel love and connect to your parents and littermates. But it will be a long road. You have to be determined. And all of you, Maplekit, Meadowkit, Martenkit, Coyotekit, Pinetuft and Dawnclaw.. You have to all help him. Do you understand that?" Aquiver's piercing gaze raked the group.

And everyone, exchanging looks with each other, at Sablekit, nodded.

They would help him.

A/N

Sorry for how long this took.
I've had a terrible case of writer's block, but I'm getting there.

What's your opinion on Pinetuft?

He reminds me of a sweet little duckling. I'm quite attached to him.

Fact Of The Chapter: Aquiver is pretty insensitive, and working with kits is very difficult for her because of this.

Chapter Nine

•◇•

"You Might Be Good looking, But You're Not A Piece Of Art"

•◇•

Dawnclaw listened as Aquiver went on.

"We're lucky we caught this early. So far, Sablekit is very withdrawn, but he isn't violent. Not yet. But many do. As they haven't had the chance to develop a conscience, they don't know right from wrong. They will hurt, even kill, without empathy or feeling."

Dawnclaw fought back a hiss. Did Aquiver know anything?! Saying that in front of kits is a terrible idea.

Dawnclaw was right.

Martenkit let out a shriek.
"He could kill us?!"

Coyotekit, who was sitting next to Sablekit, looked terrified, and began moving away from the kit.

Meadowkit looked horrified, and angry, while Maplekit's expression flickered between fear and emotionless obviously trying to keep herself under control.

"No, my precious kits! Sablekit won't hurt you!" Dawnclaw burst out, wanting desperately to reassure her kits.

Maplekit gave her mother a withering look.

"I don't think you have the right to say that, Dawnclaw. You were

the cause of all this." She said, her tone haughty.

A piece of the sky cracked, and tumbled downward. It hit Dawnclaw, cutting her flesh, denting her skull. Blood trickled down her face, it's thick stickiness leaving a red trail, a clear broadcast of her pain.

"Maplekit."
Aquiver's words broke Dawnclaw's illusion.

"Dawnclaw did.. something terrible, yes. But what she did wasn't as severe as it usually is. It was abuse, of a sort, ignoring Sablekit's emotional needs. However, it was not severe. Sablekit has a mild form, a moderate form of Reactive Attachment Disorder. This is why, I believe, that he isn't violent, or out of control. Don't blame Dawnclaw completely for this. I predict that Sablekit may hurt you, but he won't kill you, or come near it."

Maplekit looked rather ashamed, and muttered an apology. But her words washed over Dawnclaw.

Because she saw light.

Her lungs had been waterlogged for a while now.
She couldn't breathe in the dark water that she was sinking in.
But there was light.
The surface was near.

What she had done hadn't been severe. It was mild.

This didn't excuse her, not in any way.

But it meant that maybe, she hasn't completely destroyed her kit.

Maybe, just maybe, things would be okay.

"So, does anyone have any questions?"

Pinetuft looked slightly embarrassed and awkward as he spoke. "Ho - How likely will it be for him to be.. to be cured?" He stuttered.

Aquiver studied the tom for a moment.

"I'd say it is likely, if not highly likely, for him to be free of the disorder." She replied.

Pinetuft relaxed, but it was clear there was still something on his mind. Dawnclaw knew exactly what it was that he wanted to ask. But the words tasted like deathberries in her throat.

Aquiver's copper eyes were trained on Dawnclaw's amber gaze, daring her to speak the words.

Meadowkit was watching, and opened her jaws.
"What happens if he doesn't get better?" She asked.

Her eyes were defiant, her tone polite, and Dawnclaw flinched. Was that defiance aimed at her?

Aquiver was silent, Dawnclaw could practically see her thoughts.

"Well, there are two categories. Anxious, also known as Ambivalent, and Avoidant. I'd say that Sablekit would fit into the Avoidant category, where he would feel intense anger, be critical and hostile. He could be intolerant of rules and authority, lack of empathy or remorse, views others as untrustworthy and unreliable. He could be shallow or vain, have feelings of self-importance, feelings of entitlement or arrogance. He could be self-reliance; prefers to work alone than with others, and view relationships as threatening, or not worth the effort. I say could because all cases are different. And he is going to get over this. I will make sure of it."

A/N:

Shorter chapter this time, sorry!

Heck, I fucked up. I should've done more reasearch of attachment disorders before I wrote this, for some reason I skimmed over the whole violence part. I literally only realised this morning ehen I watched a documentary of YouTube about a girl with an attachment disorder, it's called "Child Of Rage." I also realised that

for Sablekit to have the disorder, Dawnclaw would've have to have been a lot more abusive. It would've made a lot more sense if she had adopted him instead.

Fact Of The Chapter: Sablekit came very close to being called Cloudkit, he is only Sablekit because "Saving Sable" sounds a lot better than "Saving Cloud" or "Drifting Clouds." Not to mention that the Clan is genetically correct and it wasn't possible to have a white kit. I prefer Sablekit over Cloudkit.

Chapter Ten

•◇•

"In the night your heart is full and by the morning empty"

•◇•

Dawnclaw's eyes were narrowed. "So how does play therapy work?"

"Well, there are many techniques, you see. The one i'm going to do with Sablekit is known as the Feeling Word game. Kits tend to find verbalizing their feelings very difficult - same goes with analyzing their feelings. This is why kits are so hard to work with." Aquiver gave a disdainful sniff.

"Anyway, first, Swiftear will make a facial expression, and Sablekit will have to say what emotion he thinks Swiftear is portraying. If he cannot figure out a certain emotion, I will suggest the answer. As he says each correct emotion, I will draw the expression in the dirt. Positive and negative emotions will be separated. Then, I will tell him 'These are all of the feelings. We have the feelings by our feet.' I am going to tell a story about myself, and it includes a mix of positive and negative emotions. When the story is completed, I place a leaf on each emotion relative to the story drawn in the dirt. Then, I tell a story about Sablekit, a nonthreatening one. Then he places the leaves on the emotions. Then he tells the story, and I place the leaves on the emotions." Aquiver finished her lengthy explanation, her voice was clear and at a higher pitch than what it was usually. Dawnclaw noticed that this happened whenever Aquiver explained something, or talked about her home - the latter wasn't often.

Dawnclaw twitched her tail, an undercurrent of anger flowing through her.

"

And why can't I be present?" She asked, trying to keep the resent out of her tone - and failing miserably.

Aquiver laughed gently. It wasn't a happy laugh, it was one of unkindness, and perhaps a trace of pity.

"Dawnclaw, you know that you need to let him heal. And sometimes that involves sitting back and disconnecting yourself from him, while we work on unraveling what you did. Don't worry, you'll be involved." She added on her last sentence as an afterthought, to try and make her words less painful.

But they stung as if Dawnclaw were covered in thistles.

"Now, Swiftear is going to fetch him, and we will walk behind the Leader's den." The brown she-cat informed her.

Dawnclaw watched Aquiver walk away.

The dilute tortoiseshell sat down with a thud. She cast her eyes to the ground, watching two ants scramble around. She swept dirt over one, emptiness billowing inside her, a fog of vacancy.

"Dawnclaw."

She looked up to see a tortoiseshell face. Brindlebee. The she-cat's pear green eyes were kind, and curiosity eddied inside their depths.

"Dawnclaw.. is this to do with what happened two sunrises ago? When you and the kits had to go into the medicine den?" Brindlebee asked, he voice so innocent, so pretty and light.

Brindlebee was kind. She was friendly and understanding.

"Dawnclaw? You did promise." The older tortoiseshell reminded her.

Dawnclaw didn't remember any promise. But then again, that whole day had passed in a peaceful haze, aside from the time spend in the medicine den. That had been in excruciating clarity.

"Of course. Let's leave camp." Dawnclaw meowed, hesitation

cracking along her spine.

She rose and walked, Brindlebee followed in silence. It was pressing and uncomfortable, not at all pleasant or companionable. The world around the two was an impressive blend of greens and browns, with the occasional orange or yellow. Leaf-falls were always very pretty in SpruceClan's territory. It was greatly comprised of evergreen trees, with a few deciduous trees scattered in the mix. The air was sprinkled with birdsong, burbling streams, and the gentle swaying of trees. Perhaps Leafbare would be kind.

The two cats didn't notice this stunning landscape, both caught up in their thoughts. Dawnclaw's were a bumbling, disorganised mess of Sablekit's therapy, the consequences of telling Brindlebee or not, and the ever-pressing weight of guilt, slowly crushing her spine. Brindlebee, on the other claw, was focused on her dazzling curiosity. It resembled a river, a torrential rainfall. Glistening, appealing, but deadly.

Dawnclaw stopped by a large fir tree. She knew there was no delay. She opened her mouth, only to be interrupted by Brindlebee's breathless words.

"One of your kits is dying, aren't they? I'd recognise the look anywhere. The devastation, the silence, the confusion - "

"No one is dying!" Dawnclaw interrupted. Small sparks landed in the dirt, embers of a fire yet to come.

Brindlebee looked bewildered. She began to speak, but Dawnclaw didn't want to deal with anything else.

"Sablekit has reactive attachment disorder. " Dawnclaw proceeded to recite a lengthy explaination. She was staring at the dirt, not noticing the flickering disgust on her friend's face. When she finished, and looked up at the other tortoiseshell, Brindlebee spared no words.

"You monster! You broke.. you ruined an innocent kit! They should be taken off you! You..."

The world became faded, unfocused. Everything became muted, a pale imitation of it's former self. Dawnclaw retreated to somewhere in her own mind, a defense mechanism to save herself from Bindlebee's stinging words.

She saw it now. While Brindlebee was kind, she was not understanding. And she didn't see the grey area. For this feline, everything was in black and white. All she could think of was the kits.

And what happens next? Dawnclaw could predict it to lethal accuracy. Brindlebee would tell everyone. It would be a warped version. What if Sablekit were taken away?

What would happen next?

A/N

The last scene was actually well written. And then it didn't save. The re-written version is quite terrible, I'm sorry.

Fact Of The Chapter: This is the second time Brindlebee and Dawnclaw have shared the nursery, the first being when they were kits growing up together, Brindlebee being the oldest.

Chapter Eleven

{Aquiver}

•◇•

"You Can Paint Me Any Colour, And I Can Be Your Clown"

•◇•

Aquiver's breathing was quick and heaving. She knew everyone back at SpruceClan camp would be wondering where she was, she was due on a hunting patrol. But she needed time alone.

She had what, five moons before she had to return? Slightly less than that now. And the journey back would take around two moons.

She sighed.

If any cat were to look at her, they would see a cat of beauty. She was slender, regal, and intelligent-looking. It wasn't as if she was attractive, in that respect, she was rather average. It was in the way she held herself. She had an air of royalty, with a somewhat haughty expression and wanderlust present in her eyes. She was an object of interest, a cat who seemed strange. One may look at a cat and say 'cat', but if one looked at Aquiver, the word coming to mind would be 'feline.'

"Five moons, five moons.. I have been wandering for seven moons..." Her voice was quiet, and fear flickered in her copper gaze. She allowed her forbidden thoughts to unleash, like a waterfall, a torrential downpour.

How many are dead now? Who has been killed by the Plague? Acosmist ? Sabaism ? Moiety?

She began to quiver, in an odd relation to her name's meaning. But it wasn't small shudders, it was full spasms, violent and frenzied.

Inside, she was fighting. Loss of control was threatening to devastate her, she needed to stay.

Think of things that you have learned, you fool, think! As long as you don't lose control, you'll be fine.

Apiphobia is the phobia of bees. Susurrus and Hiraeth, the one who founded the Empire, were mates, however Hiraeth needed to produce an heir, so she had kits with Bisou. Lilies are toxic to us cats. When these primitive Clan cats say twolegs, they mean humans.

Her breath came in hard and fast, trying to resist the blackness that was clawing behind her eyes.

She couldn't surrender to it.

She wasn't contagious, not yet.

At least she hadn't lost control yet.

She had seen what it did to the other cats of the Empire. Their eyes dilated and their class unsheathed. When touched, they were so hot, they burned. Like a fever, but worse.

When touched, they became rabid.

Manic.

Aquiver had seen it herself.

Vulpine had touched one, a gentle paw on their ear. And Etiolate spun, with speed the tom had never possessed before, biting and tearing, and ripping, and clawing....

Aquiver shuddered.

The sight of it was terrible. Vulpine, dear cat, was in shock. They didn't want to fight their friend. Especially as they were from the City of Luminescence. The cats who belonged to that City valued kindness! Vulpine was peaceful, they hated conflict.

Their screams echoed around, and blood created a sticky carpet

underfoot.

Aquiver had screamed too. She had gone to jump in. Thankfully Yūgan had held her back. Or she would've been dead too.

She still remembered the exact moment where Etiolate sliced off Vulpine's face, their eyes were blinded, their nose was basically gone too. All there was, was long slices and bloody fur, pieces of skin littered the area. Blood streamed in rivulets from the strips engraved in their skin. It was sickening.

Aquiver remembered the moment Vulpine died. His screams cut out, the torture coming to an end.

But it didn't, not for the bystanders. Etiolate continued to maul the body, not recognising that the cat he had murdered was his best friend.

All that was left was a bloody pulp. And then Etiolate began to eat it.

Aquiver gasped at the memory, vomiting the remainders of the hare she had eaten.

She had watched Etiolate unhinge his jaws, and bite slowly into the soft flesh of his friend. Then he chewed. And swallowed.

The ruins were a mess. Blood was everywhere. So was skin and scraps of brown tabby fur. And a few ginger scraps too.

Intestines hung from what was left of the body, trailing into the ginger tabby's mouth.

Aquiver had run.
Blinded by hot tears, she raced into The City of Hierarchy. Begging the Noctua, begging anyone who would listen, to execute Etiolate.

But of course they didn't.
Aquiver's City, the City of Epiphany, wanted to study him. So they constructed a caged area, and loaded him into one. Now, that area would be overflowing.

Perhaps it was torture, to keep these infected cats alive. But Aquiver understood. They needed them alive to study them.

How was the disease contacted? It wasn't contagious, or everyone would have it.
Was it something eaten? Drunken? Smelt?

Aquiver didn't know. And she had the disease.

But yet, it wasn't full blown.
Perhaps she would be okay?

The shaking subsided. Aquiver's pupils returned to normal size.

She was back in control.

Three moons.

Three moons before she would have to leave.

Five moons before she would be back.
Before she would surrender herself, her mind and her body, to experimentation.

Five last moons for her to be herself. Before her mind became someone else's.

Chapter Twelve

•◇•

"With An Angel Voice, Devil In Disguise"

•◇•

Dawnclaw was going to face it with her head held high.

Or perhaps she would, if she were a better cat. She wasn't.

"StarClan's dung, StarClan's dung, what am I going to do?" She muttered.

"That little piece of lemming dung, Brindlebee! We grew up in the Nursery together! You don't understand anything! You moose!" She cursed, rage lighting up like a fire inside her. She made up her mind then and there, a resolve of spontaneity. A better cat would know that decisions formed on impulsive rage were terrible, but Dawnclaw was not a better cat.

She forced her legs into a run, determined to get to camp.

After a short run, a raspy, shaky voice caught her attention. "Dawnclaw."

She turned. The voice was low, which was something Dawnclaw was familiar with, but it was uncertain and fearful, very unlike the unfazed, confident molly that Dawnclaw had come to know.

"Aquiver? What's wrong with you?" Dawnclaw asked. The dusky-furred molly was lying in a small patch of ferns.

"I... I." Aquiver stood, but the movement seemed to trigger Aquiver to vomit, she coughed and spluttered, looking very weak indeed.

She straightened up, and looked Dawnclaw in the eyes. "I'm not in the best health. And if you values yours, you won't yell anyone what you saw."

Malice and poison were laced in her tone, Dawnclaw felt it lick her heart, which slowly came to a stop. She hadn't seen this side of Aquiver, and it scared her.

"You're in no position to make threats, Aquiver. The Clan would side with me rather than with an outsider." Dawnclaw warned.

Aquiver's lip curled. "Are you sure? Brindlebee was screaming so loud the whole forest could hear. What are your Clanmates going to say about that?"

Dawnclaw winced. Without a reply, she burst into a run, desperate to get back to camp.

The trees blurred, and Dawnclaw slipped on a leaf. She swore that the birdcall of a common redpoll was mocking her. She got to her feet, cursing Leaf-Fall. Not matter how pretty the blend of reds, oranges, yellows, and greens were, It wasn't fun. Chilly winds signalling Leafbare, and these StarClan cursed leaves.. She shook her head to clear it, before walking the final metres to camp.

When she entered, it was chaos. She could hear the shrill tones of Brindlebee, the outrage of her Clanmates.

"Poor little beetle!" A bicolour queen named Duckflight gasped, referring to Sablekit.

"Dawnclaw is a beast! She should be exiled for what she's done!" Stormthroat voiced, loudly. Both she and Duckflight were Pinetuft's siblings.

Stormthroat had always been outspoken. She had always been rude and critical. But never had her words ever been about Dawnclaw. The two were always on fairly good terms.

"Oh, poor Pinetuft, you had no idea! It's okay. Once she's exiled, you can leave that filthy cat. No cat blames you!" Cherrystream purred, wrapping her calico tail around Dawnclaw's mate. Pinetuft shuffled away from her, clearly uncomfortable and trying to explain the real story - but Cherrystream leaned against him again.

The sight of this was what spurred a dumbfounded Dawnclaw into

action. Pinetuft was hers! And he clearly wanted nothing to do with Cherrystream. All that she-cat wanted was to be known as 'the cat that saved the abusive, exiled filth-cat's mate.'

"You flea-ridden, snake-tongued, vole-hearted, moose!" She swore, her voice high and filled with rage.

The whole camp turned to stare.

Yowls broke out, no doubt shaming Dawnclaw, but she had blocked them out.

Leaping on the Leader's Stump, she bared her teeth and them all.

"Look at you all; how pathetic! That vole-heart has been feeding you lies, and like the mindless gossips that you are, you lapped it all up like kits at a belly!" She hissed.

The entirety of SpruceClan stared back at her, in a state of stupor.

"You're saying.. you're saying that you didn't neglect the kit?" Lynxheart, an elder, rasped.

"Listen. Before you all shriek, let me explain everything. Yes. I did neglect - emotionally neglect Sablekit. But whatever that moose of a queen told you, it wasn't intentional. And StarClan, I know it was still terrible. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't regret what I did to him. But the fact is, I didn't want kits. I never did. But I ended up with them. And I ended up with five, which is many, many kits for a new queen to raise."

She paused.

"I felt alone and scared, I didn't know how to raise kits. I made a terrible, terrible mistake, but have I abandoned Sablekit? Deemed him unlovable and left? Decided he would live a terrible life and left him somewhere to die a quick death? No! I'm going to stay and support my kit. I'm going to support him while he fights, and I am going to fight too. You don't know what really goes on. You know but a mere, warped detail from Brindlebee, an exaggerator, a cat likely to overreact and act without knowing what's really going on. So before you pass judgment on me.. learn the story."

The dilute tortoiseshell finished, her voice wobbling. She stared around at all the cats around her, waiting for a response.

Silence was all she got.

"I stand against her!" Stormthroat howled, her voice furious. "That's my littermate's kit that you ruined!"

"Exactly! Poor Pinetuft. Poor Sablekit!" Duckflight voiced.

Panic bubbled inside Dawnclaw. She was an object of hatred, among her own Clan! They viewed her as an abuser! ... was she?

The bubbled consternation surged up Dawnclaw's throat, scorching it. Her skin was red, raw an irritated, it began to peel off, leaving her with holes as layer after layer of skin and fur fell. Spume cascaded out of her agape mouth, spilling down her orifice throat. Swirls of blood was mixed in with the foam, it washed everything away, until Dawnclaw was left in a state of oblivion with just one thought.

They're right. I abused a kit. Emotional neglect is abuse.

I am an abuser.

"How narrow-minded of you!" One voice shattered the obscurity. This voice was low-pitched, husky, and certainly the last cat Dawnclaw expected to come to her defense after the previous events.

Aquiver.

Dawnclaw choked. She wasn't a better cat, but maybe Aquiver was. Whatever had gone on before, the other molly had put aside.

"It's a very controversial matter. Dawnclaw committed a horrible crime, but really, Sablekit is a mild case. The damage done to him wasn't all that extensive! He's not violent, the neglect was emotional, and not only Dawnclaw's fault."

Despite the respect and liking that Aquiver had gained by SpruceClan, many yowled against her words. But there were two

cats who they trusted above all else, and those two cats stood with Dawnclaw too.

"It was all our faults." Swiftear began, from somewhere behind Dawnclaw. "Dawnclaw was a new queen, a young one, who had five kits. We didn't support her enough, help her enough. I took particular care of them, but yet I didn't notice. Minkfoot shared a den with them and didn't notice. Pinetuft didn't notice, and he fathered them! As a Clan, it was our duty to help and assist Dawnclaw, and we didn't do that. We can't blame just Dawnclaw." The bicolour tom blinked.

Dawnclaw saw a mackerel tabby tom stand beside her, his green eyes hard.

"The past has occurred, and we must forgive. Instead of pointless blame, we must come together to support this family. And we vow to be careful, attentive and kind in the future. We can prevent this." He meowed, his voice like flint.

Pinetuft picked his way through the crowd. He spoke very few words. but he sedated everyone, as it was agreed by the entirety of SpruceClan that if Pinetuft trusted someone, that meant that they were a good cat.

"I agree with Aquiver, Snakestar, and Swiftear. I stand with Dawnclaw."

No more was uttered. But as the crowd dispersed, Dawnclaw caught many looks of digust and hatred aimed at her.

Great StarClan .. what am I going to do? If you wish to punish me, do it. But don't let it affect the kits.

A/N:
Sorry for the wait! This chapter was pretty difficult to write.

Fact of the Chapter: Pinetuft is deathly afraid of praying mantises, or as they're know to the Clans, simply mantises. DawnClaw wanted to name a kit Mantiskit for this exact reason. In this scenario - same,

Pinetuft, same.

Chapter Thirteen

•◇•

"I Want To Erase Every Nasty Thought That Bugs Me Every Day Of Every Week."

•◇•

Gentle rain pattered the ground, Leaf-Fall was in full swing.

The trees which stayed evergreen towered above, their green faces soft and forgiving. They swayed in the brisk wind.

Brief splashes of colour stood out, in reds, oranges, yellows and golds. They didn't blend in as flawlessly as the evergreen trees. The few deciduous trees were swiftly losing their leaves, creating strange patches of chroma on the ground.

Dawnclaw stood in the shelter of the medicine den, the cramped space made her uneasy. But her aversion to water kept her hesitating, despite the fact that the rain was quite light.

Many of her Clanmates were avoiding her, or giving her nasty looks, and her relationship with Pinetuft was very inconsistent. Strong one day, and the next it wavered, Dawnclaw didn't know when everything went wrong.

Actually, she did. And if she were a better cat, it wouldn't have happened. Someone who was good, who was pure, would never emotionally neglect their kit. But Dawnclaw wasn't a better cat, nor would she be anytime soon. But hey, she certainly didn't plan on more abuse.

She shivered as a tail rested on her back.

Swiftear gave her a sympathetic smile.
"You can't stay here forever. Off you go." His kind, yellow eyes blinked, and Dawnclaw wanted to curl up against him and cry, like

a kit needing their mother.

She was over her head in water, and the current was washing her away. Colour was bleeding out into the water, her fur colour, her eyes, her nose. She was now just a faded grey creature, no resistance, no thoughts. Mindless, spineless, boneless.
She was nothing.

Her father, Poplarpelt, was very distant these days. He had hated having to retire to the elder's den, and Dawnclaw wasn't going to risk her tail talking to him! Tawnymask, Dawnclaw's mother was not speaking to her after hearing about Sablekit, and had chose to give Dawnclaw the cold shoulder.

The last half moon had been torture. Ever since the Clan had found out about Sablekit's diagnosis, two quarter moons ago, there had been a large rift in SpruceClan. Most cats stood with her and supported her, largely due to Snakestar and Swiftear's speech, but there were still many who blamed and disliked her.

The Nursery itself was horrible. Brindlebee was furious at Dawnclaw, and had tried to persuade Dawnclaw's kits to come to her on multiple occasions, through small acts of kindness. Dawnclaw wasn't too worried, she knew that her kits loved her and stood up to every cat who was rude to her. After some family therapy, the kits had come to understand that Dawnclaw wasn't at fault for what happened. (Well, not completely.) And they had forgiven her.

Sablekit, to Dawnclaw's extreme happiness, had made progress, albeit only a small amount. But it was tremendous. The progress was really only in analyzing when he developed this disorder and why, but it was still very important, particularly as he was young, and still learning to analyze and evaluate his feelings.

Dawnclaw sighed.
"Alright," before sprinting across the camp; right into the Nursery.

Inside, Brindlebee was talking quietly to her mate, Swallowpelt, while Dawnclaw's kits played quietly. The wet weather had that sobering affect on everyone. Swallowpelt flicked a tail at

Dawnclaw, she knew that despite his mate's feelings, he was more inclined to stand with Dawnclaw, admittedly non-verbally. After all, Pinetuft was his littermate.

Pinetuft's siblings have taken over the Clan, and there's only four of them, including him! StarClan knows what it'll be like with mine!

She began to purr; it was broken by the withering look that she was given by Brindlebee, the tortoiseshell turned her back on Dawnclaw. But Dawnclaw didn't miss the very anxious look on Brindlebee's face.

What was going on?

Everything was quiet until the moon started to dip into early morning. Dawnclaw's kits were asleep, and Pinetuft had spent a while with Dawnclaw before leaving
Brindlebee and Swallowpelt stayed together, their voices too quiet to catch.

Dawnclaw had drifted into a dreamy haze, the pleasant, fleeting moments between sleep and wake.

But the scream ended that.

Dawnclaw woke when a shrill scream of pain sounded.

Brindlebee. Her kits were coming!

But they couldn't be. She had moved into the Nursery just under three quarter moons ago! Kits took two moons to arrive!

Everything became a flash.
Dawnclaw ran to help.
Brindlebee hissed at her, but was incapable to do much due to the pain. Swallowpelt pushed her away, panic causing his eyes to grow wild. Swiftear and Aquiver were there.
The screaming was loud, too loud. Sablekit's ears were flattened, he was shaking.
Pinetuft was taking the kits out of the den.
Dawnclaw helped.

Sunrise coloured the sky in pale hues, the rain had stopped somewhere around moonhigh.

The screams carried on and on, until everything was quiet. A brown molly walked out of the nursery, exhaustion running off her face in rindles.

"The kits were a half moon early, she didn't retire to the nursery for a while into her pregnancy. She had four kits, one a stillborn." Aquiver informed her.

Dawnclaw bowed her head. Any kit born dead was a tragedy. Their soul was not yet formed, they would run with the wind for eternity, as a half formed afterthought.

"If you ask me, only one looks like it'll survive. You'd best stay away from the nursery, if they are to survive, they'll need their own place. Tomorrow, we'll construct a small den for Brindlebee and the kits, provided they live. In the meantime, you can sleep where you like."

She slipped away into the night, like a silk shadow. Dawnclaw's kits had all fallen asleep outside, in a pile for warmth and comfort. With the exception of Sablekit, who had curled up alone.

With a sigh, Dawnclaw awoke her kits; they mewled sleepy protests. She directed them towards the apprentices den, her voice soft.

"What happened?" Martenkit mumbled, curiosity sweeping under her tiredness.

"Never you mind, little one. It's time to sleep." Dawnclaw replied wearily.

"I mind very much." Martenkit said indignantly, but her words were masked by a yawn.

All the kits were too tired to make much of a fuss, and in the apprentice's den, when Dawnclaw was drifting off, she heard Fishpaw speaking to Deerpaw, and her words chilled Dawnclaw's spine.

"I really feel like something's about to happen. It's crackling the air, I can feel it touching my whiskers."

Fact Of The Chapter: At the beginning of Leafbare, the Clans all have a truce that lasts for a quarter moon. They are able to go into other Clan's territories and talk, and hunt as much as they like. It's a reminder that no matter how Leafbare goes, the Clans will remain together as a society.

Chapter Fourteen

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"Underneath It All, We're Just Savages"

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Rain was pouring down, and Dawnclaw's world was drenched in downpour. The air was chilly, and despite the poetic beauty that thrived in Leaf-fall, it wasn't all that enjoyable.

Dawnclaw's thoughts were more occupied these days, on Sablekit usually. He deserved all her love and attention, but she made sure the other kits got what they needed. She had learned from last time. It was a shame Sablekit never let her close enough to love. She knew this was a result of his disorder, but it was frustrating.

Dawnclaw was never a cat for romanticism. Or poetry.

But Pinetuft always had been.

He could see beauty in everything. In ruin, even. Perhaps it was a flaw.

But even he couldn't see beauty in this. No matter Dawnclaw's feelings towards Brindlebee, sympathy clogging up her throat. No queen deserved this.

Then again, did a queen deserve what Dawnclaw had been through?
Did Sablekit deserve what she had done?

No.
But she wasn't a better cat. Maybe when it was all over, she would be.

Aquiver had been right. Both had died in the night.

Brindlebee had only one surviving kit.

She had no fur, only pink wrinkled skin. Instead of waiting for her fur to come in, Brindlebee named her Bearkit, honoring for her to fight.

The two had been sleeping in the Leader's den, for isolation and warmth. Snakestar had been so kind; he slept in the den hastily constructed with pine and spruce. Dawnclaw thought Snakestar was a good leader, though perhaps not a good friend. And from what Poplarpelt told her, not a good littermate.

She could only imagine Brindlebee's agony.

She didn't want to.

"Dawnclaw, Pinetuft says we have to sleep!" Whined Meadowkit. She was prone to whining.

"And rightly so. It's sunhigh!" She replied.

Dawnclaw looked up, she was Sablekit walking into the den. In his mouth, he carried a ruby crowned kinglet in his jaws. He dropped the olive-green bird at her feet.

"Pinetuft said you liked them" He mumbled in a rush, without looking at her. The small tom looked away immediately.

"He said, Pinetuft said you liked them. The bird" Maplekit deciphered.

Dawnclaw felt happiness float through her bloodstream like clouds in the sky. Even now, she loved him. Their romance had been a whirlwind, but it was good.

Everything was good.

And Sablekit - he had spoken to her! Given her prey, a kind gesture. This had to be progress. It was! For those who didn't understand, it seemed stupid, it seemed strange. But Dawnclaw was educating herself on mental illnesses, attachment disorders in particular. She understood the damage she had done to Sablekit. She understood how big of a deal this is. Even if he only had a minor case of Reactive Attachment Disorder, he was still mentally ill.

Camp was subdued. They had to be, for Brindlebee's comfort. Which meant that things were calmer for Dawnclaw. However, it meant that Swiftear was spending a lot of time with the premature kits, and Dawnclaw noticed she was jealous. Had she really become so used to the tom's constant care that she felt like this whenever he was needed elsewhere?

Dawnclaw had no idea what Aquiver was doing these days. She hadn't wanted anything to do with the kits.

"Newborns aren't for me. Kits, I actually can't stand them!" She had revealed in a therapy session.

"Dawnclaw, you're daydreaming!" Martenkit mewed, her voice light and bubbly. It really matched her personality.

Meadowkit's fur was a mess, tangled and untidy. Dawnclaw rasped her tongue over it, determined to work out every last knot.

"Dawnclaw!" Meadowkit hissed, digging her claws into the ground floor.

"Well, don't be so messy, then!"

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Dawnclaw awoke to screaming.

Loud screaming.

The sound was terrible. A screech of grief, of loneliness. A screech of fury, of longing, of a loss so great and so incomprehensible...

The screams were from someone who had lost everything.

And Dawnclaw knew how that felt.

When the world fell from under your feet, when everything ended and your pieces shattered. She knew the feeling of everything being wrong, nothing being right.

And she knew how important it was to have support. Someone to

help you pick up your pieces.

When she walked out of the den, the sight was horrific. A visual so disgusting, so haunting, that Dawnclaw immediately wanted forget.

A small body lying outside the leader's den, crumpled and helpless and lifeless.

Her pink wrinkled skin was torn from her body, her intestines were spilling from it. Blood had pooled around her, staining the grass, and the poor kit. Her ears were still sealed shut, and her mouth was agape, as if she was trying to utter a scream.

Her organs were littered around the body. Lungs and liver, kidneys and nerves. Her stomach lay a foot away, it had a long gash in it, exposing the inner lining.
Several bones lay by her head, splintered and tiny.

Dawnclaw vomited. Chest heaving, the ground splattered with the contents of her stomach. It was a reddish liquid, with lumps of meat from the ruby crowned kinglet.

Dawnclaw didn't know that she was screaming until Tawnymask lay her tail across Dawnclaw's shoulders.

"Tawnymask." She choked out, and her mother's green eyes stared back in sympathy and horror.

Brindlebee was covered in blood.
She had been holding the corpse of her kit, it clearly wasn't Brindlebee who had done this.

Dawnclaw then noticed the poor kit's face. Her eyes had been gouged out, the eyelids and eye sockets were lacerated. Her eyes themselves lay beside Brindlebee, scratched too basically nothing.

This was clearly a murder.
Done with intent.

But Dawnclaw was consumed with questions. Why? Why would someone commit such a crime? Who would do such a thing? How was it done?

And when Dawnclaw looked, she could see that out of all the organs littering the ground, there was one missing. Neither on the ground or still inside her.

All organs there.
All organs but her heart.

Chapter Fifteen

•◇•

"Do I Despise These Perfect Lies?"

•◇•

Brindlebee's screams continued.

And continued.

"Oh StarClan.." Breathed Minkfoot, at Dawnclaw's ear.
"Who would do such a thing?"

Dawnclaw turned to her sister; she smelled of blackberries.
"I don't know. This is disgusting."
She trembled. She noted that Minkfoot, her untouchable littermate, was quivering too.

The sound of voices were deafening, some screams joined the cacophony, a few even fled from camp in disgust.

She overheard Snakestar speaking urgently to Yellowtail, the deputy, and Swiftear.

"Swiftear, we need to give her poppy seeds, the lemming-brain won't shut up!" Snakestar roared, clearly cracking under pressure.

"We need to get information out of her, though!" Yellowtail hissed, his fur bristled.

"No. She needs rest. This has been a terrible ordeal for Brindlebee, both she and her mate." Swiftear said firmly. Yellowtail merely lashed his tail, while Snakestar moved to speak to the Clan.

Dawnclaw turned away.

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The day soon lapsed into night, and the wind was biting, carrying with it the scent of dead leaves. Leafbare was approaching quickly.

Dawnclaw's kits were safely away from all the drama in the nursery. The warriors had spent the day cleaning up the blood, with countless trips from camp to the river; from the river to camp. They'd had to wait for the blood to dry before anything could be done. Then they had washed it away with moss soaked in water.

Dawnclaw had made sure that her kits didn't see the body, but they knew there had been a murder. And Maplekit had snuck out of the nursery to have a look.

Morbid kit. Still, that's the least of my problems.

Brindlebee had yet to make an appearance, but a few things had been established. First of all, the murderer was thorough. The kit didn't carry the scent of any cat, but merely the scent of rosemary. Another thing was, they were definitely a cat. And from SpruceClan. No animal could have sliced such fine wounds. Not to mention that they came back for the eyes.

The third thing was, there had been no one about in camp when it occurred. Everyone was either asleep in their den's, or hunting.

The fact that a kit-murderer walked among them was a thought almost too heavy to bare. Dawnclaw found herself in a state of abhorrence and anxiety.

•◇•

She was currently sitting outside camp with Pinetuft, who hadn't returned to camp since sunhigh, when he saw the body.

He was curled up next to her; his claws dug into the earth.

"I just can't believe it." He said, for what must've been the sixth time.

"I know. I know." Dawnclaw hushed him, like what she might do

with their kits. Tawnymask was watching over them, Dawnclaw was not leaving them alone.

"It's such a horrible thing. She was so young! I just can't fathom it. It's horrific! A sin worse than Goshawkfur himself." He mumbled.

Dawnclaw's fur instantly bristled, she hissed. "Don't say his name!"

Goshawkfur was a cat feared more than anything by all three of the Clans. He was a cat so vile, so despicable.. He had attempted to "make cat's pure again" by selective breeding, killing off those without fur of ginger, bicolour, tortoiseshell, tabby, or black. He had murdered many cats before he was killed, by none other than Applethroat. An agender cat with morality so strong they were guided by the rivers, by the trees and by the sky. The clouds allowed them to hide, the gold sunsets shone in their eyes. They blazed with all the glory of the sun, and. StarClan, touched their paws, blessed them with humility, with speed, and with fury worthy of fire.

The two fought, and Applethroat was Goshawkfur's downfall. They counteracted pride with modesty; hate with morality.

And that night, the stars began to weep. A warrior so brave, so strong, had turned down a path so tainted. They had failed him.

And as the sky shone with dawn, carrying away the blood, Applethroat began to sing. Even now, this is a strange and rare phenomenon, as cats do not sing. He sang a trembling aubade, serenading the Fallen Warrior.

Even now, Goshawkfur's name is forbidden, cursed, if you will. He was referred to as the Fallen Warrior, or the Unspeakable.

"Sorry. I didn't think. It just slipped out." He replied, his tone meek.

Before she could reply, Dawnclaw heard the sounds of voices coming from camp. Without a word she stood, tapping Pinetuft with her tail as a signal to follow.

She galloped into camp, with Pinetuft hot on her heels.

"I was right there! Right there and this murderer took her. Right there!" Brindlebee lamented, her grief throbbing in her tone,

vibrating Dawnclaw's skull.

"Brindlebee has only one enemy, and that enemy is Dawnclaw!" Stormthroat said dramatically.

As heads turned, Dawnclaw instantly snapped back.

"Oh please. If I murdered everyone I didn't like, you would've been dead moons ago, you filthy maggot. Brindlebee is not my enemy. She caused a lot of trouble, and I'm not going to forgive her, but we are not enemies. I wish no harm upon her - I mean, nothing serious anyway. I would never hurt a kit, never!"

"Try telling that to Sablekit." Cherrystream hissed, with a look of jealousy.

"Stop, now! We have just passed around accusations. We will all sit down, and debate and discuss the situation in an organised manner." Snakestar thundered.

As Dawnclaw sat, she noted Aquiver sitting next to her.

"Aquiver. It wasn't you, was it? I mean, you threatened to kill me, and you seem to have enough skill to pull that off. Plus, I don't know the customs of your place. I -"
Dawnclaw whispered.

"No, Dawnclaw! I may not like kits, but I'm no murderer. I didn't mean it, when I threatened you. I just.. I felt sick.. It was a reaction to weakness. I've already told you that. No, Dawnclaw. I'm sorry, but the murderer was one of your own."

A/N:

It's going to get exciting ;)

Who do you think is the murderer?

Chapter Sixteen

•◇•

"It's Slipping Through Your Fingers Like Sand"

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The dilute tortoiseshell's claws ticked against the ground, a nervous habit she had developed.

The truth was, confined spaces scared Dawnclaw, but it was no phobia.

And the medicine den was very small.

"And how did you feel?" Swiftear said quietly, gentleness easing his low voice.

"I felt.. I don't know!" Sablekit's face was crumpled in frustration, and Swiftear hushed him calmly.

"It's okay to not understand your feelings. Were you angry? Sad? Scared? Happy?" Swiftear prompted. Dawnclaw listened attentively.

Sablekit puzzled over this for a moment, and cast a fleeting glance at Dawnclaw. He looked back at Swiftear, and then to the ground.

"I was sad. I knew I was different, that something was missing. I watched the other kits a lot and realised I didn't love like they did. I didn't know what was right and what was wrong. And that made me scared and angry. I though I was a monster. I thought I was.. that word you said." His words were directed at Swiftear.

"An abnormality." Swiftear said quietly.

"Yeah, that. And then I was angry. I wanted to hurt the other kits. I wanted to hurt them in bad ways because I thought it was their

fault that I was different. Then I wanted to hurt Dawnclaw and Pinetuft for the same reason." His voice was so matter of fact and calm, and a thought surfaced in Dawnclaw, so horrific that she almost gagged.

What if Sablekit had murdered Bearkit?

"Do you still want to hurt other cats?" Swiftear asked.

"No. I know it's wrong now. That's what I told Aquiver. She said that's good. But she's strange. It is good, right?" He asked, innocence intertwining in his mew.

Relief washed over Dawnclaw. Sablekit didn't do it. Unless he was lying...

"That's right. Hurting other cats is wrong, unless we're having a battle, and even then, we shouldn't kill, and try to avoid anything too serious." Swiftear replied. "Are you still sad?" He asked.

"Yes. I don't know why. I still feel sad a lot. But I'm not afraid anymore. Now I understand that I'm sick. My head is sick. And all this talking helps my head get better."

Dawnclaw couldn't help but smile at his response. He really was getting better.

"But Swiftear, I'm still a little scared. I don't feel better yet. Not really. I still don't love anyone properly! I still think about doing some things that are bad, because I don't realise they're wrong!" Sablekit's eyes were wide, and his body shifted slightly, so that he was as far away from Dawnclaw as he could be without it being obvious.

"That's okay. It takes some time. Being an apprentice soon will help you. You'll have responsibilities, and Aquiver says that it'll help you." Swiftear smiled at Dawnclaw.

"Now, Dawnclaw, how did you feel before Sablekit was diagnosed?" Swiftear asked her. He turned to her. Yet Sablekit stayed in the same position, turned away from her.

"I was anxious, and busy. Looking after five kits when you didn't plan for any is hard. But I loved them. All of them. Even if I did neglect you, Sablekit."

Swiftear narrowed his eyes. "And now?"

"Now I feel differently. I was worried about you, Sablekit. But now I'm happier, I know what's going on and how you feel. " She began to address Swiftear, understanding that he narrowed his eyes to warn her, Sablekit still didn't like interacting with her.

"I'm still very guilty though. I want to repair him, Swiftear, but I can't. But he can get over this. In all honesty, I'm not sure what I feel." She continued.

"Alright, that's good. Sablekit, do you think you will be able to love Dawnclaw?" Swiftear asked.

Sablekit was silent.

Dawnclaw's claws were scraping now.

"I don't know!" The black kit burst out.
"I just.. don't know. Dawnclaw.. inside, I thought she didn't care about me. I didn't develop love properly. I don't know if I can love her without forgiving her.. or forgive her without loving her. But I can't do both. And I can't do either yet."

Sablekit refused to meet her eyes, his paw was trembling.

And each word felt like flames.

They burned inside Dawnclaw, filling her with a heat so hot it numbed her; she couldn't pinpoint it's place.

"Sablekit, why do you think you can't do both in the future?" Swiftear asked, his tone still calm and gentle.

But Sablekit had withdrawn. He refused to speak another word, he refused to look at anyone.

After a long silence, Swiftear forced a smile.

"It's okay, we all have setbacks. You did very well, Sablekit. You can both go."

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And Dawnclaw found herself running again.

Her paws hurt when they pounded against the ground, but she didn't care.

"Dawnclaw!" A voice called out.

It was Rainfleck and his patrol, consisting of himself, Finchface, Fishpaw and Waspwhisker.

"We're hunting. Want to join?" He asked cheerily.

But his fear scent proved otherwise.

"Why not?" She mumbled, ambling over to them.

The group walked in silence, though the melancholy air and the stench of fear were overwhelming.
The murder of Bearkit had really shaken up SpruceClan.

A scent hit Dawnclaw's nostrils, she spun around sharply.

A vole!

She immediately pounced, but her reflexes were rusty. The vole scuttled away, and Dawnclaw after it.

She gave a good chase, but the vole disappeared. She gave a hiss of anger, and Waspwhisker rested his tail across her back.
"You've been in the nursery for five moons. You're not going to come back easily! Minkfoot didn't." He smiled.

But Dawnclaw wasn't listening. A small caught her nose, and she began to shake.

It couldn't be.

Her companions caught it too, and their hackles raised by instinct.

Waspwhisker crept forward, his cream pelt fluffed up.

And then they saw it.

An OakClan apprentice, dead.

The smell of death had filled the air, and Dawnclaw's reaction was her usual, she vomited.

But this death was different to others.

The throat and stomach were slit. Fresh kill was stuffed into it, the cat was bloated from the prey shoved inside them after they had died.

Dried blood caked the grass, but nothing was more shocking than the sight of the symbol carved into the cat's back.

Except maybe for the heart that had been pushed into their gaping mouth.

Bearkit's heart.

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Fact Of The Chapter: Cherrystream doesn't love Pinetuft. She just wants what she can't have.

Chapter Seventeen

•◇•

"Drinking Shampain To Forget Yesterday"

•◇•

The moon had completed it's cycle, one moon had passed.

Dawnclaw was back to preforming warrior duties, as her kits had been apprenticed.

Meadowpaw to Mallowheart, a good choice as far as Dawnclaw was concerned. Mallowheart was her best friend, though the two had drifted recently.

Coyotepaw had gone to Stormthroat, and whilst Dawnclaw was not a fan of that horrible molly, she had to admit that she was a good mentor to the little ginger tom.

Martenpaw had been apprenticed to Swiftear, no one and seen that coming. The bouncy she-cat had always seemed an average (and not very intelligent, though no one would say it out loud.) cat, but she had really come into her own. Swiftear was very relieved at this, he would be retiring the moment she became a full medicine cat.

Maplepaw had scored Snakestar, though that didn't surprise Dawnclaw. She would either destroy or lead the Clan one day, she was really an extraordinary kit.

And dear little Sablepaw was apprenticed to Rainfleck, intelligent and caring tom. They were all very good matches.

Minkfoot ended up in the nursery once more, and the father was unknown. Well, there was one thing they did know, and that was that the father wasn't her mate.

Needless to say, it had been a scandal.

Another surprise was Cherrystream herself ended up in the nursery, the father was Yellowtail.

"The Clan needed more kits!" He explained himself. Really, Cherrystream was the Clan joke.
But then again, the two had had kits together before, those kits being Waspwhisker, Brindlebee, and Grayfur.

All in all, everything was fine.

Aside from the fact that Rooktail had been found dead.

It was a simple one, a mere slit of the throat, but with that same symbol. One vertical line and two diagonal ones.

No one knew how. No one knew why. It had simply occurred.

On a happier note, Sablepaw really had made an improvement. He was an excellent hunter, and spoke to Dawnclaw willingly from time to time. He interacted with his fellow apprentices more, and seemed to be forming a connection with Deerpaw.

All the thoughts of the past moon accompanied Dawnclaw as she walked with her Clan by moonlight. Leafbare had arrived, no snow had fallen yet, but it was cold. Very cold. Rain poured down most days.

Now was no exception. Dawnclaw's dilute tortoiseshell fur was soaked through, and she shivered with the wind.

"Thank StarClan we're near camp. This rain will be the death of me."
Complained Duckflight, her bicolour fur sodden.

Dawnclaw grunted in response, before an odd sound caught her ear. And she had developed a large hatred to strange sounds and scents.

"Did you.. Did you hear that?" She asked.

"There's a cat over there." Fishpaw motioned, her grey paw

trembling.

"You jumpy fleas, that's Minkfoot! Let's leave." Duckflight snorted.

But Dawnclaw was staring at her sister.
"No. She hasn't been feeling herself lately, and I haven't been there for her. Even if she hates me, and I her, I think we need each other right now." Dawnclaw said decisively.

"Suit yourself." She shrugged.
"Come on Fishpaw!"

Soon, Dawnclaw was alone.

"Minkie?" She used her kit nickname for her sister. Neither of them had used it in seasons.

A small sob broke the tension.

"Minkie!" Dawnclaw ran forward. She couldn't help it. Part of her was beginning to appreciate her sister, despite all that had happened between the two.

"Dawnclaw." Her sister's voice was thick with emotion, and it reminded Dawnclaw of blood. Sticky, thick, and metallic.

Her sister was muttering some words repetitively, and Dawnclaw couldn't make them out.

Minkfoot seemed to have forgotten of Dawnclaw's presence, and was crying louder instead, hysteria burst like flowers in her song.

"I'm sorry."

Dawnclaw finally caught Minkfoot's words.

"Rooktail, I'm sorry!" Minkfoot screamed, suddenly.

Dawnclaw jumped, and her mind dissipated into mist.

Was the murderer Minkfoot?

She then noticed silence had fallen.

"I loved him." Her words were calm, quiet, and throbbing.

"I loved him. And we.. I'm carrying his kits... and he's dead!" Minkfoot's howls continued.

"So why are you sorry?" Dawnclaw asked her, starting at the grey back of her sister.

"Because I.. I blamed him. I blamed him for dying and leaving me. For making me love him. For making me feel! I don't want to feel! I want Rooktail!" She pushed past Dawnclaw, hazel eyes wild.

She stopped.
"You won't leave me, right?"

"No." Dawnclaw promised, as rain fell into her eyes and blurring the world.

"Thank you. Your lies will always comfort me whenever I lie in the darkness. It's always there, you know. In the corners of my eyes. I can run from it, but it's always with me."

When Dawnclaw blinked and the world focused, Minkfoot's pawsteps were retreating.

Minkfoot and Rooktail ?
She seems sadder than I thought . But after all that happened between us , what can I give her ?
What will she take ?

A/N: Kinda short but just a fuller.

I really like Minkfoot.

Fact Of The Chapter: Dawnclaw and Minkfoot have hated each other for moons, ever since Minkfoot withdrew and said things that she shouldn't.

Their history is very vague.

Chapter Eighteen

•◇•

"It only takes a drop of evil, to fuck up two beautiful people"

•◇•

The deep viridian of the evergreen forest stood in stark contrast against the bland sky.

Dawnclaw's limbs ached. She had been hunting all morning, along with Aquiver, Maplepaw and Snakestar. The cold rattled her.

Maplepaw was carrying a squirrel, and Snakestar's pride was clear. So was Dawnclaw's. Aquiver too, which struck Dawnclaw as odd. Aquiver and Maplepaw seemed to be quite friendly, but when did they get the chance to talk?

But another part of Dawnclaw wasn't really surprised at this - Aquiver and Maplepaw had similar personalities, or at least a similar thirst for knowledge.

Everything was calm and peaceful, aside from shreds of fear that drifted around, bringing apprehension for Leafbare, and rising terror surrounding the murders.

The other Clans were aware of what was going on. They had to be, an OakClan apprentice had been killed too. The matter was clearly shrouding all three.

The air changed. It wrapped around Dawnclaw like tendrils, choking her and burning her.

Everything was wrong.

Her blood was pouring from her ears, lining the ground with it's oil-like filth. Tears stung her eyes as the wrongness stopped her heart.

She was dead.
But still alive.

"Dawnclaw? What is it? Are you sick?" Snakestar asked, impatience laced within his concern.

"*Hraith*" Aquiver muttered, and her paws began to shake.

"Something is wrong" Dawnclaw whispered.

At the same time, Aquiver began shaking violently.

"I feel sick I need the medicine den." She said, all in one breath. She became a blur of brown.

The patrol walked in silence.

"Snakestar!" A wail split the air.

Stormthroat came running through the trees, and Dawnclaw saw the small shape of Coyotepaw running past, towards camp.

"Snakestar, you have to come and see this. Have you eaten recently? Because you'll vomit. This is absolutely.. well, come and take a look" Stormthroat's words were vague, and she immediately began running back to where she had been.

Dawnclaw cast a bewildered look with Maplepaw.
If it could provoke this kind of reaction from Stormthroat, then whatever it is must be horrible.

"Come on." Snakestar commanded, and spurred his legs into action. Dawnclaw and Maplepaw followed.

With swift gaint, and apprehensive hesitance, Dawnclaw's body was on fire.

Motion guided her, the twigs and leaves underpaw dug into her hardened pads.

She was a string, undone.

She was wild, she was noctilucous.

And then she saw it.

The scene.

In comparison, it wasn't as bad as what happened with Bearkit. In Dawnclaw's mind, nothing was. But this was haunting.

An ElmClan cat, one Dawnclaw recognised as Lotusfur, had a wire wrapped around her neck. Embedded into her flesh, it was clearly strangling, clearly deliberate.

But the wire was wrapped around a branch, in a tree. She was hanging, suspended. Dawnclaw had never seen anything like it.

And if that wasn't enough, Lotusfur's mouth was agape, her needle sharp teeth glinting in the late sunlight. But there was blood filling he mouth, still spilling down the sides.

She wasn't yet dead.

It struck Dawnclaw that Lotusfur was a friend of her sister's. First her secret mate, the father of her kits.. and now her friend?

Lotusfur was a light cat.. but dragging a full grown cat up a tree.. who could've done this?

"She's alive! Why have you done nothing!" Dawnclaw howled, though all she could hear was incessant ringing.

"There's nothing to do. She'll be dead shortly." Snakestar replied.

It was true. No one could live through that.

"Well, it looks like she's hanged herself. Except you primitive Clan cats have no idea what that is, nor the concept of it." The familiar low voice sounded.

Dawnclaw turned sharply, like cutting through fog.

"I thought you were sick." She growled, her eyes narrowed.

"I simply needed to, ah, clear my insides." She said delicately.

Dawnclaw flattened her ears against her head, Lotusfur was trying to speak. But all that came out was a horrible gurgling noise.

It bubbled and splashed in her throat, coating the forest around her in thick, hot slime. It clogged Dawnclaw's insides, and no matter how much she coughed and screamed, she couldn't dislodge the heavy sludge.

The gargles cut off, and Dawnclaw was free. Her throat cleared, and her stomach was light. Her heart could beat, and her lungs were once again functional.

But she wasn't yet out of the woods.

"Is that... is that a...?" Maplepaw's words hung in the air. Dawnclaw was in such a state of stupor, she didn't notice that her daughter was still here; she would've sent her away from this terrible scene.

She looked at the place that her daughter's gaze was fixated upon, she screeched at what she saw.

A tongue.

No wonder Lotusfur couldn't speak. Her tongue was ripped out, and a wire constricting her throat.

The sight of it was revolting. Lotusfur's body was hanging from the wire, in a gruesomely, romanticised way.

And the tongue, StarClan the tongue. What was the meaning of it?

Dawnclaw gave some kind of unintelligible screech, it sounded foreign to even her own ears.

Dawnclaw vomited. And again
Soon she was a retching, babbling mess.

No one spoke for a while. Stunned silence uncased the area.

"Well, we have to get her down. We can't have corpses just swinging

from trees." Aquiver's voice was monotonous, a greyscale, steady and gave a vibe that felt like the opposite of comfort.

The brown molly scaled the tree, while Snakestar began to walk back to camp. Wordlessly, the others followed him.

"Stormthroat. Take Lotusfur back to ElmClan later."

•◇•

Dawnclaw was curled up against Coyotepaw, he was still shaking.

"I don't know. We have to keep caring for Sablepaw and continuing the therapy, but everything is getting so complicated! Soon I'll be giving the entire Clan therapy! Still, at least the group sessions would be interesting." Swiftear ranted, with a rueful laugh.

"Watch Coyotepaw closely, what he just saw is honestly quite scarring. Dawnclaw? Are you listening?"

Dawnclaw's was asleep, her subconscious was prancing in the meadows, dancing with a cat with heaven in her eyes.

It's a shame that creatures of purity are so easily corrupted.

_____

A/N: I keep forgetting the kits are apprentices now.

I have so much homework, I'm going to pretend to be sick, so I can do homework all day rip.

Fact of the Chapter: Lotusfur and Minkfoot had once been a little closer than Dawnclaw knew ;)

Chapter Nineteen

•◇•

"We Need To Simplify"

•◇•

{Aquiver}

"I just don't know." Her claws were digging into the earth.

"His therapy went well! Stop worrying. Though, I suppose you have a lot to worry about, don't you?" Swiftear said, his voice was boiling with resentment.

"Swiftear?" Aquiver questioned.

"Well, they're not your Clanmates, are they? You've only been here for three moons, you didn't grow up with them! I'm scared, Aquiver, scared! Who will be next? Me? Lynxheart? His kits? My family are at stake!" He hissed, his eyes flared with anger.

Aquiver was burning. Alight, and fueled. She was veiled in light, encased in ultraviolet violence.

"You don't know what I've seen, Swiftear! You don't know the terrible things I've witnessed. I've seen cannibalism between two loved ones, I've seen a forest with eyes hanging from strings from branches. I've seen sickness take a beautiful place and call it home. I've seen water so vast it could destroy me, and Aurora, it came so close. Salty tongues lapped at me, and the voices pulled me under as they lulled me to sleep. I've awoken with a body that was so battered, I still bare the scars. I awoke with sickly blood melting the sand where I lay, the blood of my very best friend. She achieved what we wanted, but I had too continue playing the game."

Swiftear was in shock, his colours swirling at their paws.

"I've seen laughter, I've tasted freedom. I've touched perfection, I've heard divinity. And it was those which destroyed me the most. So

do your worst, Swiftear. I will let the bears shake me to the ground, and I will walk out alive. Because I am indestructible, I am a god. So touch me. And maybe you can feel it too."

Fact Of The Chapter: Aquiver is godkin.

Also a weird short chapter.

Chapter Twenty

•◇•

"I'm Not Cursed, I Was Just Covered In Dirt"

•◇•

The sweet taste of paradise still hadn't left Dawnclaw's lips.

She never knew hell could feel this good.

Everything had melted and nothing had a cause, a half moon had drifted like a bird's wing.

The silence was lethal.
And it felt so good.

Dawnclaw didn't like to chase after things now forgotten, but she seemed to be doing that now.

The white snow that was falling, combined with the foreboding that wrapped itself around Dawnclaw's stomach was forcing her to chase her goodbyes.

Like a butterfly.
Like a moth.
Like a sparrow.

As things cracked under her feet, the forest was subdued. All of the Clans were wrapped in their sorrows, and Dawnclaw hated it.

She hated the word, the shape, the sound, and the light.

She tasted bitterness on her tongue.

Solitude followed her with it's best friend, melancholic heartbeats.

Pinetuft was walking beside her, but his wandering eyes sparked her unease, her faithlessness and his friendliness were a harsh mix on a day of frost.

Her paws guided her away.

Simply away.

She didn't know where she was going, but the second she sat down, she knew it was the right time.

She didn't know where Pinetuft was. He'd be worried. After all, it wasn't like Dawnclaw it walk away from someone.

She had been merely an apprentice when her mother had shown her the Circle of Snow.

They had named it that, but all it was was a small area underneath a pine tree. A small space, all alone, somewhere for comfort, somewhere to call home.

She curled up in a ball, settling herself between the roots of the tree. They confined her like mesh, but yet that confinement always felt right.

She could let her mind wander.

"I'll sing him."
The words sounded like rust.
"I'll sing him alive."

The words were odd, yet strangely poetic. The oddity was Dawnclaw didn't know what 'singing' was. So why the words slid across her numb tongue into the cool air, was a mystery to anyone who heard.

There was only two who heard her words.

Fate.

The sound of pawsteps in snow broke Dawnclaw into the world, and she stared at the white landscape around her.

Moonlight cast everything into an eerie glow, and the footsteps reminded Dawnclaw that she shouldn't be alone.

The murderer could be here.

A little face appeared close to her own.
Sablepaw.

"Dawnclaw?"

"Sablepaw."

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know. I think I'm dying."

He didn't question her words.
"Why?"

He did.

"Everything is wrong. I ruined you. Everyone is dying. Everything is broken, and I think it's my fault." Her tone was flat, devoid. This was a fact she had long since accepted.

Silence.

"You didn't ruin me. Ruins last forever. You.. damaged me. But damage can be repaired. And I'm being repaired. I am, you've seen it! Aquiver says so. Swiftear says so. Martenpaw says so. Snakestar says so. Pinetuft says so. You always say so."

She blinked at the young cat. He was very different from the feline he was a few moons ago.

"The deaths are the murderer's fault. They're doing it. And we will find them. Everything will be okay."

She sat up, and looked at her kit.
"Yes."

"What is this place?"

"It's home for the fallen ones."

No further exchange was made. He settled down close to her.

She was falling asleep, washed in the grey areas, where the lost wander.

But those words unhinged all her loose strings.

"Dawnclaw... I love you."

A/N:
This and the next chapter weren't meant to be separated but this ending is perfect.

Fact Of The Chapter: Dawnclaw and her mother still aren't speaking.

What's your opinion on Dawnclaw? Does anyone actually like her?

Chapter Twenty One

•◇•

"I've Lost, I've Lost My Innocence, I've Gained My Self Belief."

•◇•

Dawnclaw was a butterfly.

Or perhaps a hummingbird.

She flitted and floated, fluttered and flew, everything was light and airy, and *wonderful.*

Who cares about the monster that lurks underneath, who cares about the ominous eyes that glittered?

Sablepaw had said it.

He had said he loved her.

It was still a difficult concept to latch on to. A three moon recovery? According to Aquiver, it usually took season - cycles. Whatever that was.

"I don't think he meant it, not really. He'll think he loves you, but in reality, he simply is beginning to form a healthy and normal attachment. Real, true love, will come in time."
Swiftear said softly.

Dawnclaw sighed.
"I know. But don't you see it? I'm *alive.* Like a bird in newleaf. I know what you're trying to say. But I'll only listen after I crash."

She glanced at Swiftear, he seemed to visibly wilt. His ears dipped, as did his bicolour head. His yellow eyes were downcast, sadness fit him like a second pelt.

"Swiftear? Is something - is something wrong?" She asked, tentatively.

"I.. you need to accept that his words are only a start! He isn't healed yet, your wishes are clouding your judgment. And.. well... you'll see. Soon." He made a quick departure, fur rumpled and frumpy, his scurrying reminded Dawnclaw of a rodent. Or a roach.

"What do you mean?" She snapped.

"Uh.. Dawnclaw, you're needed on a patrol." Swallowpelt mumbled, coming up behind her.

The tom hadn't looked her in the eye since his kit was killed.

"A hunting patrol? Great!" She tried to add bounce into her mew, but the sad truth was, Dawnclaw had grown soft. She had mellowed out. Gone was the feisty warrior who jumped at the thought of action. Gone was the enthusiastic, slightly belligerent mollyshe used to be. The nursery and all the latest events had simply melted her down and reformed her. She was a chrysalis, half-formed and nothing more.

And nothing less.

She missed the cat she used to be.
But she liked her new self too. Every day she shed her skin and started over. Today was just another skin.

"Yes, a hunting patrol. Me, you, and Finchface."

The tom looked like olives, bright and dark, light and heavy. Sunny like a berry, and bitter like a root.

He was bicolour, with more black than Swiftear. He seemed concealed.
Thicker. Disconsolate.

"Let's go." She murmured.

Finchface ran up to join them.

•◇•

Dawnclaw walked into camp on

worn - out bones. Her pelt was weighed down with waterlogged tiredness, she was out of shape.

But hey. She'd been in the nursery for six moons, and out for one.

Her keen eyes spotted Pinetuft, he gestured her over with a wave of his tail.

"What have you got?" She asked as she trotted over.

"A rabbit." He grinned up at her. "Come on, I saved it for you!" He smiled.

"You're too sweet." She flicked him with her tail, and settled down on the dirt beside him.

A noise caught Dawnclaw's ears, and she pricked them slightly.

".... so soon? I thought you'd want to stay?"

"I have to.... my customs... Empire needs me."

Aquiver and Snakestar!

But what were they talking about?

It struck Dawnclaw in the chest, she flew through the air and sprawled on the dusty ground.

Aquiver was leaving.

Wasn't that what her people did? She'd said that for their equivalent of a warrior ceremony, they send cats out for twelve moons to gain as much new knowledge as they could. And when they returned in success, they renamed themselves. Right?

"No."

Dawnclaw didn't realise that she's spoken until she caught Pinetuft's quizzical look.

"I can hear. Can you?"

"Dawnclaw, you're making no sense!" He said, worry slithering around in his meow.

"Aquiver and Snakestar. She's leaving!" Dawnclaw exclaimed.

"Ahh, so that's what their conversation is about. I could hear it, but I couldn't make sense of it. She's leaving?" He blinked.

Dawnclaw sighed.
"I'm going to miss her. I became... attached? I don't know. I like her. But I hate her."

Surprise sparked from Pinetuft's pelt. "Why in the name of StarClan would you hate her?!" He said, loudly.

A few Clanmates stirred.

"Because she... I saw her one day. Clearly sick. In a bad state. Terrible, actually. She was... I don't know. And she was so angry that I saw. She threatened me, you know."

He looked horrified.
"Why would she do that?"

Dawnclaw flicked an ear.
"Beats me. Maybe she didn't like appearing weak."

"Or maybe something deeper was going on..." He said, ominously.

Dawnclaw laughed.
"If I have to hear another of your stupid conspiracies, I'll have to exile you! 'It was Sweetpaw, she was the one that laid the rabbit dung trail! She poisoned the fresh-kill!' 'There's no doubt about it. Fishpaw continued her legacy and drugged the fresh kill!' 'Sweet whispers to her in her sleep, influencing her, manipulating her!' 'Other Clans exist, ElmClan are covering it up!'" She giggled as he clouted her, she batted him back and soon they were rolling around and laughing.

"Everyone able to scale the Towering Maple, gather in front of me for a Clan meeting!"

Dawnclaw looked at the darkening sky. It was a good time to announce the news, most cats would be shedding their daytime sluggishness, and awakening in the night.

"I have some sad news to announce, words we all knew were coming. Aquiver is leaving us."

Shocked growls greeted his words, the dusky molly was popular.

"She will making the the two moon long journey back to her.. Empire, and will be leaving right away. Aquiver, we wish you well." Snakestar smiled warmly at her, and Dawnclaw looked on in amusement. Snakestar, warm? A rare occurrence.

Aquiver turned to leave, the parting yowls of the Clan cats serenading her farewell.

"Thank you for helping me, Aquiver. I'm going to be properly better, thanks to you!"

Dawnclaw felt her heart drip through her ribcage at the words of her Sablepaw.

"Yes, Aquiver, thank you. For all you've done to help us!"

Aquiver gave Dawnclaw a mere nod, while offering a few words to Sablepaw. Dawnclaw suspected the two had already conversed.

But one voice rose above the rest.

"Aquiver, wait! I want to go too!"

Dawnclaw's heart solidified. And then shattered into the sound.

Maplepaw.

She couldn't say anything. It was as if her mouth was stuck with honey. Except honey didn't taste so reminiscent of heartbreak.

Aquiver seemed shaken. More emotion than Dawnclaw had seen her possess, aside from the time where she had threatened her.

"Maplepaw. No. You know what I told you. It's far too dangerous."

But Maplepaw, usually just as stoic as Aquiver, was almost breaking.

"You have to let me come! I need to go home, Aquiver, home! This isn't home. Danger doesn't matter, not to the heart! I'm intelligent enough for your City, you said so yourself. I can help you all. I want to help you all. Please. A short life there is better than a long one here. I can't stay here. I'll decay until my bones line your mind. I know what you told me. About those chained to their mania. And you know what ? I don't care. I don't give any dung! I can help. I belong with The Empire of Hiraeth. Please. I'm begging you."
Maplepaw's speech was powerful, and Dawnclaw's heartstrings broke. One by one.

Aquiver smiled.
"Come on, little maple tree. You know I'm too soft on you! I have more to say, but it's insignificant." She purred.

Dawnclaw fragmented.
"No. No. No!" She howled.
"I gained a son and now I'm losing a daughter? No! You can't take her! I won't allow it, you vile little moose!"

Even Pinetuft was screaming, though Dawnclaw couldn't hear what he was saying, nor what Maplepaw was saying. Everything was inaudible.

It flashed.
"Stay, Maplepaw. You could become the best warrior we've seen - I was planning on you becoming leader!" Snakestar pleaded.
"Why do you think I mentored you?"

Flash.

Pinetuft was sitting down. Silent and defeated.

Flash.

Tawnymask was yelling, desperate for her grandkit to remain in the Clan. Yelling words of "foolishness!" And "she's just a kit! She

doesn't understand what she wants!"

Flash.

Aquiver was trembling, eyes gleaming as ghosts tumbled from them.

Flash.

Maplepaw was speaking to Dawnclaw, emotion flooding from her.

Flash.

Sablepaw was stunned and shutting down.

Flash.
Flash.
Flash.

She had come undone.

A/N:

Have I mentioned a PineClan before? I think I have. There is no PineClan. Only a Pinetuft, a SpruceClan, an ElmClan and OakClan.

Also; I forgot Swiftear's name and referred to him as 'The Dude' throughout this entire chapter. Your local genius.

Fact Of The Chapter: I may have said or implied that Aquiver was a Burmese. I lied. She's an Oriental. I think a chocolate oriental is the correct term? I'm not sure.

Chapter Twenty Two

•◇•
" I'm Hearing Sirens"
•◇•

The light slowly faded away.
She'd hated that burning white that had blinded her.

She welcomed the healing darkness as it came, riding her grief like a wave.

"Dawnclaw. It's good to see you're back with us." Snakestar whispered.

She gave him a blank stare.
"I'm okay now."

"I know. I can tell."

Dawnclaw had been watching the clouds for a quarter of a moon. Watching the night lapse into day, the warmth and naturalness of the darkness ebbing like the tide.

Finally she had tied herself back to the sky.

"I still can't believe she.. I can't believe she left."

He rested his tail on her back. She knew it was supposed to be reassuring, but all she felt was weight.

She sighed.
"It doesn't feel right, without her. From what Aquiver said, it was dangerous for Maplepaw to go!"

"She knew. Whatever it was. She knew. She's a smart cat, one of logic. She doesn't follow her emotions. She's like me. While some of her decision was based on her emotion, she would've put a lot of thought in it. She would've chosen something she knew was the

cleverest, most logical idea. There was a lot she hid from us."

Snakestar wasn't looking at her.

Dawnclaw didn't care.

It was all the reassurance she needed.

It was only now that Dawnclaw realized that she had no idea what Aquiver's society was really like. Aquiver had only given a very filtured version, everyone knew that. It had never occured to Dawnclaw to get to know Aquiver and what her life was really like. For Dawnclaw, Aquiver's sole purpose was to help her son.

But that led to more questions. What was so dangerous that Aquiver didn't want Maplepaw to follow? When did they become so close? How did Maplepaw manage to get the closed off cat to open up? And how in the name of StarClan did they get so close to the point of Aquiver using an affectionate nickname, "Little Maple Tree?" Dawnclaw didn't think she'd ever seen an affectionate side to Aquiver.

And why had Maplepaw been so desperate to join her?

And what impact would that do to Sablepaw?

Well, it was a negative impact, of course. Sablepaw wasn't speaking to Dawnclaw, he had withdrawn once more. Swiftear had said that setbacks were expected to happen.. but Dawnclaw had never expected to feel as heartbroken as this.

She didn't know what to do.

Had she failed as a mother? To both Sablepaw and Maplepaw? Of course she had failed Sablepaw. She has literally neglected him. What about her other kits? Did they wish for a better mother too?

Perhaps they longed for Minkfoot, she had shared the Nursery with them. But then again, Minkfoot wasn't the most appealing mother. She wasn't very fond of kits, but yet she was expecting her second littter. At least Dawnclaw wasn't Tawnymask's and Poplarpelt's only disappointment.

Did they yearn for Brindlebee? StarClan forbid it.

Cherrystream? No. Even the kits weren't that naïve.

Dawnclaw was walking back to camp, her paws dragging, her stomach heavy.

Her stomach felt more than heavy. It felt like it was oozing out of her body, running down her legs in the sick form of bile. It felt as if she was weighed down by rocks, sinking beneath a body of water so large, she felt compressed at the mere sight. She felt like everything had lost it's clarity. It was a fog and she was dissapating into it.

Brindlebee.

Why was Dawnclaw thinking about that foul molly?

Because Brindlee was a different cat.

She was a kind, energetic cat when she was growing up, though she had mellowed out.
But now she was hollow, and angry, and brittle-boned.

Dawnclaw hoped she would never have to feel what she was going through.

But the feeling that she currently felt wasn't all that great.

The suffocating numbness was constricting her. She had no lungs but yet they burned. She was fire and she was ice. She burned of heat; she burned of cold. She floated, she was featherlight. But she was chained to her emotions, and she bled out into the sound. The salt and the silhouettes danced in her lonesomeness; she was lethargy and lackluster skylines. She was a haze, but if you lit a match, she would ignite.

Dawnclaw knew.

She knew when the silence ceased, and when the birds stopping singing.

She knew when the scream shattered and scattered, she knew when

blood meets bone, and paranoia melts the two.

She knew.

And on fatalistic feet, she ran.

Snakestar followed.

She saw the tortoiseshell first. Her black and ginger fur were tinted silver in the moonlight, her eyes frenzied.

And Dawnclaw looked.

A black furred body, and a head, separated from each other. Blood was everywhere. It was painted into the trees, which had this symbol carved into them, everywhere. The trees were absolutely covered in the symbols, it felt deadly.

Blood was wet underpaw, red and viscous. It mixed against the snow creating a strange, disgusting texture.

The deceased himself looked very apathic, perhaps even peaceful. His eyes were closed, and terror mingled with serenity painted his body.

Lavender and numerous other flowers were scattered all over his body, some stained with blood, others pure and untouched.

Sick.

Sick.

Sick.

What kind of murderer would cover their victim in flowers, as if to honour them?

It was sickening.

And then the world split in to. It crashed and splintered, the truth so jarring and so real that Dawnclaw combusted.

Sablepaw had been slaughtered.

The black cat was Sablepaw.

Dawnclaw couldn't make a sound, but the heavens opened.

Rain poured down, washing away the world and stripping it to it's bones.

Maybe a cleanse was the only thing it needed.

But until that, Dawnclaw would surrender herself to the headaches, and let the nothingness drift.

A/N:

I'm sorry.

Chapter Twenty Three

•◇•

"I'm Turning Radioactive"

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◇•

If Dawnclaw welcomed the darkness before, now she didn't care for it.

She cared for nothing at all.

As far as the dilute tortoiseshell molly was concerned, nothing mattered at all. She walked her tightrope alone.

She felt like her skin was in tatters, she felt like she was boneless. All that was left was an empty skull, and empty chest, and an empty heart. Where had everything gone? She had washed away.

The waves that had ceased into a gentle lull, lapping against her fur, was now a frenzied tempest, lashing and biting. The white water filled her mouth with the rough rasp of salt; it burned away her tongue.

Sharks were circling and she had surrendered herself to them. Their teeth grazed her sides; they didn't bite. They kept her writhing, a torturous dance, one where death was not an option. Only pain.

And Dawnclaw was consumed by it.

She know understood that before when she had been happy and floating was just the eye of the storm, and this time she was not getting out.

She raged and billowed, tumbled and dilated, a mere speck.

She was gone and he was gone.

Did anything really matter?

"And mix it together like this." Swiftear's voice had an odd quality, it echoed and flickered, like it was far away.

There was no reply.

"Well done, my poor beetle. Do you want to talk to Pinetuft?"

"No." Martenpaw's voice was almost inaudible.

"You have to talk to someone. You've experienced a lot, far more tragedy than a kit - well, apprentice should. Internalizing your feelings is dangerous, especially for a cat with a personality like yours. You need to talk - It's a shame Dawnclaw isn't here for you." He meowed. His voice was gentle, but his last sentence was venomous with accusatory.

I can't help it.

I can't help her either. Or any of them. If I had never had them, I would be a happy warrior with Pinetuft , investigating murders. I wouldn't have wasted what should've been the best part of my life on therapy, guilt, self-loathing, grief and bitterness. I should never have had those kits.

"Dawnclaw, open your mouth The ginger and barley grass will help you. The honey and lavender too."

Dawnclaw was unresponsive.

"Open up." Swiftear's tone was light.

Dawnclaw didn't feel light.

She closed her eyes. She just wanted to sleep.

She wanted Sablepaw.

It was too painful here.

She wanted StarClan.

She could join them. All she needed was deathberries.

She opened her eyes, her gaze sweeping the herb store, searching for those bright red berries. They reminded her of poppies.

"Don't even think about it. Martenpaw removed all dangerous items from the store. Face it, Dawnclaw. You need to give yourself time to heal, and need to be there for your three remaining kits."

Dawnclaw spat in defiance.

"Now look at you. You're a mess. You're not helping anyone this way. Eat this and sleep. When you awaken, you will get to your paws and you will find Martenpaw and talk to her. And then you can get yourself something from the fresh-kill pile, and sleep again. And then the next day, you'll do the same, but you'll speak to Coyotepaw. And then the next day, you'll repeat the process, but you'll talk to Meadowpaw and Pinetuft. And slowly, you'll gain motivation to hunt and to patrol, and eventually, you will be okay. " Swiftear ordered her.

The dilute molly gave nothing but a small nod.

He was right. She loved her kits, and they needed her.

She could do it.

She opened her mouth obediently, and he placed the poultice in front of her, which she lapped up quickly.

She winced at the taste, but at least it felt warm and energizing.

"If you told me when I was an apprentice that I would end up like this, I think I would've run. Fled to ElmClan, probably. Anything to avoid this fate. It's just so unfair." She said, her voice defeated and worn out.

Swiftear nodded.

"Can't say I don't know what you mean. I don't think I would mind too much if I just dropped dead. I'm old and tired, and I want to be young and for everything to be easy. But if things were easy, do you think we'd be satisfied? No. That's why I keep going. Because there is an apprentice who I must train, an apprentice that I must care

for. I live on because happiness dances in the strangest of places, and we just have to make sure our flickering fire doesn't die before happiness can reignite us. Trust me, Dawnclaw. Things will get better. No one is happy at the moment. But we survive."

She nodded.

The words were just enough for Dawnclaw to breathe again.

Maybe she would find peace in the darkness, if she only accepted that it was over.

A/N:
This chapter was longer and better until I accidentally deleted it. Rip.

Fact Of The Chapter: Sablepaw wasn't originally supposed to die, but my friend suggested it and I just.
"Yesss"

Also. The next chapter is the most dramatic. And then after that there are two chapters, and it's over.

Literally. The next chapter. Final guesses for the murderer ?

Chapter Twenty Four

•◇•

"I've Been Static For Too Long"

•◇•

The moon had changed.

Whole to a half, half to a whole.

Leafbare would be over soon.

In the moon of Sablepaw's death, nothing had happened. No deaths, no excitement.

Deerpaw and Fishpaw had become warriors though, Deerwish and Fishfang respectively.

Minkfoot had kitted, they were two grey tabby, healthy toms. She had named them Murkkit and Eveningkit.

They were gorgeous.

Dawnclaw sighed softly as Coyotepaw walked away from her. She had been talking to her kits, and her mate, making sure they were all okay. Everyone was talking.

And it was good.

Now that they were all talking, no one was breaking alone. Everyone cared for each other. And looked after each other. No one's emotions were going overlooked, no one was emotionally neglected.

Things were as okay as they could be.

Dawnclaw was alone in the moonlight.

It was serene, and tranquil. Just lonesome, and darkness.

She was at peace, within herself, for a minute or two.
She missed Pinetuft's scent.
She missed the feel of his fur.
The lap of his tongue.

She was lucky to have him. He didn't abandon her after finding out of her neglect. She knew he had considered it though.
Who wouldn't?
Was it bad that she would've left him, if the positions had been reversed?
Yes. It was terrible.

But she was becoming a better cat.
At least she hoped.
She wanted so badly to be that better cat.

Her body felt heavy, like it was filled with lead. She was sinking into a state of extreme sleepiness, she felt weighed down and welcome.

It was only when she saw eyes refracting light when she realised that she was being watched.

She tried to scream, but she felt sluggish, and immobile, paralyzed.

She couldn't move. She couldn't scream.

She fell asleep.

A/N:
Splitting the dramatic chapter in two for dramatic effect. The next chapter is when it really gets exciting.

Pro writer over here.

Fact Of The Chapter: Yeah, I think I said in like the first chapter that Dawnclaw was Biromantic heterosexual or something, but I've decided she's just hetero. She just seems very straight to me.

Chapter Twenty Five

{ Trigger warning for suicide and self-mutilation }

•◇•

"I Don't Have An Identity. I Always Feel Like Someone Else"

•◇•

Dawnclaw awoke.

She blinked, everything around her was a faded grey colour.

Immediately her head was pounding. It was like someone was banging her head into a rock, again and again and again.

"Oooh." She groaned, still feeling sleepy heaviness gripping her limps.

And then she remembered.

"StarClan!" Dawnclaw yelped.
"Where am I? Am I dead? Did someone kill me? What happened?" She yowled.

"Shhh!"

It was only a simple noise, but it lashed across Dawnclaw's throat, and along her chest. She felt sweet blood that tasted like flower slid down her open throat.

"No. It cannot... not you.. I have to believe it isn't you..." Dawnclaw whispered, her paws shaking.

"I'm sorry. You think it's wrong, you think I'm wrong. But it's you who's wrong."

A small, grey and white cat stepped into the moonlight. It illuminated her; she looked ethereal, divine.
Her hazel eyes shone with a wild hope, it was dazzling and dizzying

and Dawnclaw's ears rang.

Perhaps it was the ringing, or perhaps the headache was blurring her vision. Perhaps none of this was real, and she would wake up in camp, having fallen asleep, and having the worst dream possible.

But no dream could conjure up Minkfoot in this way.

Everything about her was different. She wasn't the weak, sad cat that Dawnclaw had been seeing for the past two moons. Or was it three? In fact, her whole life she had been a rather weak, pale character.

Now, she reeked of power. It sparkled in her every move. Dawnclaw was a mere rain shower and Minkfoot... she was a tempest.

An angel in their rage.

Starlight ran in her veins and she was drenched in liquid paranoia.

"Did you.. did you kill Lotusfur? Bearkit? That OakClan apprentice they said was called Beepaw? Rooktail? S.. S.. Sablepaw?" Dawnclaw stuttered.

Fear that tasted like mother's milk was warming Dawnclaw's insides, filling her with pain unlike any other. Her sister had done this ?

Minkfoot let out a laugh that was like a gust of wind.
She was a picture of translucent vulnerability.

And then she sniffed.

To Dawnclaw's surprise, her sister looked as if she were about to cry.

Minkfoot's head was bowed, her legs were shaky.

She looked up, her hazel eyes were luminous. She let out a sigh. It was tired but triumphant.

"Yes. It was me. I murdered a newborn kit, an innocent apprentice,

my lover, and my best friend. Ha, I killed my lover and my previous lover. Shame I didn't kill Waspwhisker, then all the cats I loved would've died at my claws. Did I ever tell you that I loved Lotusfur? We were together once. And yes, I did kill your Sablekit. I did them all in such horrible ways. Before you judge me, Dawnclaw, you must listen."

Dawnclaw was having none of it.
"I'm not going to be that cat in nursery stories. I'm not going to listen to your story and wind up getting killed. I'm no fool trying to play hero. And I'm not going to waste my time talking."

Dawnclaw stood, her fur shining over her muscles. But she hadn't reckoned on additional factors, and her feet collapsed from under her.

She still had this heaviness inside of her.

Minkfoot looked oddly amused.

"Let's start on how I got you here. Remember when Coyotepaw gave you that vole? I asked him to give it to you. He thought it was a nice gesture. It wasn't. It was a death sentence."

Minkfoot paused, and Dawnclaw felt her heart racing. She knew what was next.

"You drugged it. With poppy seeds, didn't you?"

Minkfoot purred. It sounded forced.
"Yes, I did. You should've realised, voles are usually bland. Well, they're disgusting of you ask me, but you usually find them bland. But the poppy seeds would've made it sweet."

Dawnclaw tried to stand once more, but her legs wobbled and she tumbled to the ground.

"Don't bother." Minkfoot said, her tone deadpan.
"You ate the prey a while ago."

Dawnclaw felt sick, sick to her bones, sick to her stomach. What had become of her sister? She had killed Sablepaw!

"Now.. I don't like killing. I'm no monster. After all, I killed people who I love. I don't want to kill you, Dawnclaw. I didn't want to kill Bearkit or Sablepaw, I'm no monster! StarClan, I didn't want to kill Lotusfur, or Rooktail! But between you and me, my love with Rooktail wasn't exactly romantic."

"That's disgusting! I don't care about your motives, I don't care about whether you like killing, you repulsive slug!" Dawnclaw couldn't fight the red that was circling her paws, twining up her legs. This rage was consuming her. It was carmine, and rough like the surface of a rock. It tasted like violence, it felt like impulsivity and scorched bloodstains.

"I will destroy you for what you've done to my kit! You monster! You sickening monster! All along I was worried that it was Aquiver, that it was Sablepaw. But it was you! You did this! You -"

"Silence! Do you want to know why I'm like this, or will I kill you now?!" Spat Minkfoot. She looked glorious, but cracked.

Her mask was slipping.

This time, she seemed desperately sad, as pitiful as she had when Rooktail had been found dead.

Dawnclaw wondered how much was genuine.

"When we were kits, you found your place. Extroverted, happy Dawnkit, who already knew who she was. I didn't. It didn't matter until I was an apprentice, when suddenly I felt.. so alone and lost."

"I blamed myself. Why, it was my fault, I wasn't a good person. I wanted to be a better cat."

Minkfoot began again, this time with shining eyes and wonder. Joy laced her tongue, and pure idolisation spun from her tongue, like a web.

"And then I saw Him. I met some loners, no big deal. But they told me about a God, that will spare you of your crimes and purify you. They told me about him, and I... well, it was as if all my dreams were handed to me on a golden crown."

What in the name of StarClan is a crown?

Dawnclaw could only listen to the words of her sister, as she tried to process what was going on.

"I don't think you understand how desirable it was. I was insecure, I hated the cat that I was. And here was a chance to be free from all of those heavy, destructive thoughts. In the afterlife, I would be with Him! I wouldn't have to worry about the Dark Forest!" Minkfoot crowed, she shone like a glacier.

"You wouldn't have had to worry about the Dark Forest if you hadn't have murdered everyone!" Dawnclaw snarled, still in a state of shock.

"No. No, Dawnclaw. Every moment of every day, I was obsessed with purity. I still am; I can't help it! I worried, that every tiny thing I did would land me there. I was irrational. 'Oh no, I missed the prey; what if someone starves to death as a result! I would've killed someone and I'll be forsaken!' It sounds pathetic, but that was going through my head every day!" The grey and white molly continued, hysteria lining the insides of her words.

"And He was a promise. A way to save myself. And I will join Him in spirit, tonight!"

Dawnclaw attempted to stand once more. She managed it, but only to crumple again.

"And what does this have to do with the murders?" Dawnclaw asked, desperation in her voice.

"It's the price you must pay to join Him. Your soul must be fully blackened before you can be purified. You must be a monster before you can be purified. But it must be in a certain way. "

"The loners and I, we continued meeting. They told me about these things called the Seven Sins. Sins are acts of evil. They are Greed, Envy, Pride, Gluttony, Wraith, Sloth, that means laziness or apathy, and Lust. Each crime I did, was one sin committed."

Dawnclaw was dumbfounded. She assumed the murderer simply

murdered because they wanted to, not because of some huge complex plot!

"I killed Bearkit first, that was out of wrath. It was a revenge on Brindlebee, for what she did to you."

"No!" Dawnclaw hissed, terror racing up her spine, and clogging her lungs.
"You can't murder in the name of me!"

Minkfoot examined her claws.
"Oops." She said sarcastically.

"I killed the apprentice in the name of gluttony, why else would they be stuffed with fresh kill? And a heart too. Rooktail was killed because of lust; he and I had an interesting relationship. Basically, we mated, I killed him, I bore his kits as a mark. Fell in love with him though, that was an unforeseen circumstance. I killed Lotusfur out of pride, I was finalising our last argument. I told her I would be the last on my paws, and I was. I cut out her tongue as a symbol; she cannot tell of our former relationship. I killed Sablepaw out of envy, he got a second chance that I didn't get, not without a price."

Dawnclaw was shaking, incapable of speaking. Her sister had murdered her kit out of jealousy?

"And the last two, well, sloth was my apathy to the murders, even though I'm not necessarily apathic on the inside. I know they died for a selfish cause, but really, I don't care so much anymore. I'm corrupted, I'm forsaken, I am the storm. But yes, I care. But it won't matter when I'm with Him. And Greed, well, you'll find the wretched thing. They're an ElmClan warrior, in a hole by the Twisted Rowan. He'll be dead soon, you'll kill them when you find them. You have to, put the dear thing out of their misery. They're currently in solitary confinement. They've been driven to insanity due to the drops of water that continually drip on their head. I'm surprised no one noticed the small stream I dug to direct the water to them."

Dawnclaw was gagging, her world was in motion, spinning, and breaking, and reforming in a form of chaos.

"I didn't want to kill Sablepaw, I didn't want to hurt you. But I had to. But don't you worry, you'll be seeing him awfully soon. After all, the final phase of the plan will make sure of that"

Dawnclaw's insides froze at her sister's cryptic words. She didn't want to die, not now! The world had become still in response, frozen in motion.

"I have to kill you, a blood sacrifice. It could've been our parents but frankly, I'm not close to them."

"You were never close to me!" Dawnclaw screeched, awakening at last. "Someone save me! Help! Once I can move, I swear to StarClan, i'll-"

"Kill me? Doubt it, herbheart. I'm experienced. And after I kill you, I must kill myself. Claw out my heart, and engrave the symbol of my God!" Her words rose in ecstasy, apparently she couldn't wait to kill herself.

"How do you know this god exists? What if he's fake?" Dawnclaw sneered, really, she was just buying time.

"He's real, trust me. I've seen Him. Not in His full glory, but he appears to me. In dreams, as trees, as the faces of the deceased. He calls me, from the wind, from the sky, and from my heart."

Minkfoot advanced on Dawnclaw, Dawnclaw struggled to her paws once more.

She found she could stand, but she couldn't step.

"You'll simply have a slit throat, no pain. I have to cover myself in your blood, at the same time as I slice the symbol into myself. And then, when I am covered in your blood, I will claw out my own heart. I will be dead, and I will be His."

Dawnclaw vomited, it was her typical reaction. She couldn't do it, she couldn't believe this. Was her sister serious?

To prove this speculation correct, Minkfoot unsheathed her claws, and held one paw awkwardly over the other.

"This will have to do." She muttered, slicing into her skin. One line, vertical, straight. Two more, quick slashes. They were diagonal, and thin lines of blood began to spill.

Minkfoot watched the blood well for a moment or two.

Without warning, Minkfoot leapt, her claws hooking in the soft skin of Dawnclaw's throat. Taken by surprise, and out of practice, Dawnclaw simply fell and flailed.

Her throat had torn, and there was blood, it was running down Dawnclaw's chest, staining it red. Everything became cold and hot simultaneously, as breathing became difficult.

She watched in horror and shock as pain filled her body, as her sister began rubbing herself over Dawnclaw's wound.

Dawnclaw felt herself bubbling. Her throat was gurgling, and her lungs were flaring flames.

She tried to scream as Minkfoot began clawing at her own chest, blood was everywhere and Dawnclaw was sinking. Minkfoot's wound was getting deeper and deeper, she was screaming in pain, (*or was the screaming me?*) And swift, healing darkness pressed against Dawnclaw from all sides.

But maybe it was Minkfoot who was the God. Because, tonight, she was glorious, and certainly no mere feline.

I'd like to stay , but yet ..

I'm gone .

A/N:

Hopefully this made sense, I'm pretty proud of the plot. Basically, Minkfoot believes in some God that will purify her, but to do so she must become an absolute monster.

The God does not exist.

You'll find out what happens to the two next time.

Facts Of The Chapter: After some debate, I've decided Dawn claw is heteroflexible, she did have some attraction to Aquiver in the beginning. I also headcanon Minkfoot as having a subtype of ocd, where someone becomes obsessive over religion, or a similar belief. I know next to nothing about this, I just remembered it from something I read however, the person who wrote it obsessed over the environment. (It was about her) I say headcanon because I've already written a mentally ill character as a villain, and I don't want to enforce that belief that mentally ill people are villains, and vise versa. So, it's up to you.

Friendly reminder that Minkfoot is my second favourite character and I love her. Also this is glitchy and unedited so expect even more typos than usual.

Also Minkfoot couldn't have actually clawed out her heart - cats don't have elbows.

Chapter Twenty Six

•◇•

"You sucked me in through the cinnamon stars"

•◇•

Dawnclaw felt a weight leave her, or perhaps, she was leaving it?

Either way, she felt lighter now.

She felt free-flowing, and glistening, and translucent.

She heard the sound of rain. It was pattering against the ground around her, soaking into the soft dirt and moss. She felt it around her, not so disgustingly wet, but smooth and peaceful.

She didn't feel wet at all.

She opened her eyes, greeted by dismal grey clouds.

She was in camp. But not in the medicine den.

It struck her as odd.

But Dawnclaw noticed an even stranger phenomenon. Her wound was gone, completely healed. Her throat was perfectly fine. No scar, no missing fur.

It wasn't that she saw her wound, no. She'd need a puddle for that. (And judging by the noise around her, it wouldn't take her long to find one.) It was more a feeling. She sensed it, she knew it was gone. There was no pain at all.

She sat up, and saw that it was indeed raining. Small water droplets fell from the sky, and landed in a splash. Dawnclaw could see her Clanmates huddled in their dens, with looks of deep sadness on their faces.

Why were they sad? Minkfoot had been found out, and she,

Dawnclaw, was alive!

Are they sad because I'm alive ?

But Dawnclaw had more pressing questions. Why wasn't she in the medicine den? How much time had passed? And why was her wound completely healed?

.... And why wasn't the rain touching her?

Inside, Dawnclaw knew that all of these questions had one answer, but it was an answer she didn't want to face.

But she had to.

Dawnclaw turned around slowly, and found herself looking at a small group of cats.

Rooktail, tiny little Bearkit, Dovefang, Dawnclaw's deceased mentor, and Sablepaw.

Dawnclaw opened her mouth, wordlessly.

The group walked over to her, their fur glittering with the light of stars. The pressed themselves against her, while Dawnclaw trembled.

"It's not fair." She said hoarsely.
"I didn't want to live this way. I was barely a warrior.. I failed my kits... I accomplished nothing." Her voice was hollow.

Dovefang shook his head at her.
"Hush Dawnclaw, hush. You didn't fail your kits at all. You had a lot to give, and you didn't gain that much. But death isn't the end, not at all! In StarClan, life goes on. In StarClan, everyone can grow and flourish, free of trauma. And you have Sablepaw to help, remember?"

Dawnclaw stared at the grey tabby, and her chest burst open.

There was no blood, there was no pain. There was a blossom in the place of her ribcage, it was swelling with hope. She had a chance to

be free.

"Before we get caught up in this matter, we have a few things to discuss." Rooktail told her, in his typical serious manner.

Dawnclaw nodded. "And that is?"

"StarClan cats can travel from the skies and back to our territory. All you have to do is fade." Bearkit meowed, wisdom shining in her tiny, kit-blue eyes.

Dawnclaw nodded again.

"To fade, you just have to concentrate. Close your eyes and visualise yourself dissipating into the atmosphere. And you do it! I stay around here most of the time, so Brindlebee isn't alone. She was a good cat. She did bad things, yes, but it wasn't her fault." Bearkit said earnestly, and her words broke Dawnclaw's heart.

Not sure I agree with you , little one . If a person does bad things , then they're a bad person .

"Do they know we're here?" Dawnclaw asked.

"Of course not." Dovefang snorted. "If you knew how many times I tried to stop you doing stupid things.." He growled.

Dawnclaw laughed in spite of it all.

"Do you want to see your kits and Pinetuft?" Bearkit asked, innocence as sweet as honey slid from her jaws.

Dawnclaw's gaze became shadowed.
"Not yet. I don't think I can."

Bearkit nodded understandingly.
"I'm going to see Swallowpelt." She purred, her wrinkled pink skin shimmering like sunlight on water.

Dawnclaw looked up suddenly.
"What about that cat? That Minkfoot mentioned, the one she trapped in a hole? We need to rescue him!"

"No need." Sablepaw said, his voice deep and his eyes on her paws. "They were found with you and Minkfoot. You were dead and she was dying and blood was everywhere. The Clan found them because they had managed to escape and went to find Minkfoot and kill her; they heard her voice. They were foaming at the mouth and they.. they weren't a cat anymore. Snakestar killed them, there was nothing anyone could do for them. They're okay now, though. In StarClan." He told her.

"And.. Minkfoot?"

"Well, her God wasn't real, we all knew that." Dovefang scoffed.

"She's not in the Dark Forest." Rooktail cut in smoothly. Seeing Dawnclaw's look of shock, he continued. "Not yet, anyway. Her wound was horrific, she hasn't healed yet. She'll awaken in StarClan in a few sunrises, and in the meantime, she's having her trial."

"Her trial?" Dawnclaw echoed.

"Yes." Rooktail confirmed.
"StarClan will decide what to do with her. It's judged externally and internally. Externally is the actions, and internally is the thoughts, the intentions, the reason why. You had a trail too, you know, but it was a short one. Some cats didn't want you here because of what you did to Sablekit, but it was quickly decided that what happened wasn't intentional, and that you did your best to support him in the aftermath."

Dawnclaw sat down, everything was too much for her.
"Does every cat have a trial?"

"Of course not!" Dovefang snorted.

"Have Minkfoot and I been buried?"

"Yes." Bearkit mewed, walking over to them.
"Why do you care about her? She killed you?"

Dawnclaw gave a half smile.
"I understand her, in a way. She just wanted to be a better cat, as I

did. The difference was, she murdered and lost all her morality in the name of a God, while I lay around in self pity."

Bearkit looked furious.
"She killed me! She ended every chance I would've had! I was supposed to die a deputy, you know! I was supposed to live!"

And with that, she faded, tears glittering in her wild eyes.

"She seemed so wise, so cheerful." Dawnclaw remarked.

"A cat doesn't have to forgive to be wise. She shouldn't be expected to forgive a cat who robbed her of everything she ever wanted. Just like a cat doesn't have to forgive their abuser." Sablepaw spat bitterly.

He .. He doesn't forgive me ?

"It's a good thing I love you, Dawnclaw!" He said, his tone light and cheeky.

Dawnclaw blinked. Light and cheeky? Sablepaw?

"StarClan can heal more than physical wounds." Dovefang nudged Dawnclaw affectionately.

A/N:

There is literally just the epilogue to go and then this is over.

Note that Sablepaw, or any other mentally ill cat isn't ever fully healed. They have to get though some of it on their own, though the severity is significantly lessened.

And Minkfoot is going to end up in StarClan, but she will face harassment for the majority of her StarClan days. Similar to Ashfur's situation.

Lotusfur always stands up for her though.

And Bearkit will never forgive Minkfoot, nor should she be expected to.

And another thing ! I'm going to be doing a character Q and A, it will be posted in my oneshot book. So list any questions for the characters below :)

Fact Of The Chapter: Dawnclaw's mentor died a few sunrises before her final assessment, the two were close, as mentors and apprentices usually are.

Epilogue

•◇•

"What's the point of playing a game you're gonna lose?"

•◇•

Sablesong walked into camp, a sparrow, a vole, and a red crownlet in his jaws. Their warm blood and juice had seeped through it's wound, teasing his mouth with it's tantalising scent.

But he must give his prey to the Clan.

He walked in, his clanmates at his side, they greeted him with friendly faces.

He strode over to the fresh kill pile, dropping his catch on the pile.

"Thank you, Sablesong." Snakestar nodded.
"You're a fine deputy. The Clan needs all the prey we can get after the battle with ElmClan."

Sablesong nodded back. "We certainly do. Thank you Snakestar, I certainly hope I'm stepping up to Yellowtail 's pawsteps, it's a shame we lost him."

Snakestar's eyes didn't dull, he merely nodded.
"It is a shame, he would certainly have made a wonderful leader, but you, Sablesong.. you will lead us into greatness."

"Why, is there a prophecy?" Sablesong exclaimed.

"One doesn't need a prophecy to see that you are destined for greatness." Snakestar's eyebrows were raised.

"Thank you very much Snakestar!" He beamed.

Everything is good,
He thought, walking away.

I am deputy of SpruceClan. My sister, Martenflight, was the medicine cat, as Swiftear had sadly passed on. My mother Dawnclaw is very proud of me, and so is Pinetuft. Meadowfang, Coyotefur and Maplebreeze are fine warriors - when I'm a leader, Maplebreeze will be my deputy. And not to mention my wonderful mate and kits, Appleshine, Hazelkit, Stoatkit, and Fawnkit.

The nursery was where he stood now, gazing in from the outside.

Appleshine was lying in her bed of moss and pine needles, her green eyes sparkling. Her long, ginger and white fur was beautiful and well groomed, and her plumy tail was twitching. Their kits were sleeping, curled into her stomach, and Sablesong purred.

He walked over to them, about to curl up next to them, when he resurfaced.

Cold, sharp water flowed over his head, drenching his fur. It sunk to his bones, spreading like veins of ice, and a glacier was forming inside his skull.

"Sablepaw. You were dreaming again, weren't you?"

The black furred apprentice looked up, seeing the wrinkled, furless skin or Bearkit, and a tall, bicolour queen.

He knew this queen. He had heard about her in stories, seen a glimpse of the enigmatic feline.

Cranestar.

The first leader of SpruceClan.

Sablepaw simply stared, not answering Bearkit's question.

"He's been dreaming again. Sablepaw, let old hopes die, you're dead! I'm dead! We'll never be warriors, never be deputies. We'll never be leaders!"
Bearkit hissed.

She turned to Cranestar.
"Every night! Every StarClan forsaken night. He has a dream of

being alive, variation upon variation. Did you have kits this time? An apprentice? A mate? "
Her voice was a toxin, bitterness and envy melted into her normally cheerful tongue.

"Sablepaw.. there's a cat here to see you." Cranestar meowed.

A molly walked into the room, and Sablepaw stared.

She was very different to the other StarClan cats. There was something about Clan cats that set them apart. They all looked hardened, they all carried weight upon their shoulders.

This cat didn't. She had a youthful look about her, a cheerfulness that glittered in her eyes. She carried only the weight of time, and she wore it with pride.

"I am older than time itself, and younger than starlight." Her voice was breathy and lilting, melodies curled at the edges of her words.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" He asked.

The molly was white, and translucent. This was odd, was she fading? In StarClan, no one faded. He also noted the rarity of her pelt colour, and her obscure hazel eyes.

"My name is Hiraeth. I walk the skies of the Empire, for I am the founder. Where those you know, Aquiver and Maplepaw now wander."

Sablepaw was confused.

Hiraeth then went on, explaining the Empire.

Sablepaw noticed Dawnclaw lurking outside; she looked like she had been crying.

"Sablepaw, this is rare. I have decided to allow you and Bearkit to be reborn - into the Empire. This old life will be left completely behind - you will have no memories of it, you will forget everything. You have a chance to live.. Will you take it?"

Her words formed like wisps, tugging at his hopes and lay tantalizingly out of reach.

"But.. I don't want to forget everything. I want to change what has already happened! I want us to go back to when I was born, but this time Dawnclaw wouldn't neglect me, and I wouldn't have the reactive attachment disorder, and Minkfoot wouldn't kill everyone, and Maplepaw would stay with us!" He burst out, his voice a barbed wire.

"But I want to live.." He was lost, tumbling and turning. A chance to breath air that he hadn't breathed before, a chance to breathe stardust and liquid inchor.

A chance to live.

A chance to love, and form connections.

A chance to burn his trauma to the ground and sing with the forgotten ones.

"I'll do it."

Bearkit had already accepted the offer.

Dawnclaw suddenly ran to Sablepaw, abandoning all pretense that she hadn't been lurking outside.

"I don't want you to forget me! I need you to love me!" She howled.

Sablepaw looked her in the eye, everything had faded. It was just Dawnclaw and himself.

It would never be that way again.

"Dawnclaw, I love you in the best way I know how. But don't be so selfish. I have a chance now, and you had yours. Our last exchange may not be so sweet, but if happiness exists somewhere, somehow, then I will find it. Devote yourself Dawnclaw, learn from this. Not every mentally ill cat is killed and then reborn. There are many who wander the Clans with hollow eyes and sick insides. You need to help them. Visit new queens in dreams, teach them to not make the

same mistake that was made here. Teach medicine cats how to heal those who need it. Because I avoided recovery while others did not."

He paused.

"Do it for me."

Dawnclaw let out another sob at his words.

"I will. But you must live for me."

He nodded, and leaned into her, though discomfort burst like flowers from his spine.

He stepped away from her.

Hiraeth stood tall, her eyes suddenly burning with intensity.

It was instinctive.

Sablepaw began to walk towards her, and touched noses with her.

Her nose was cold, and he was wrapped in ice.

It surged inside him, touching the blackened areas of him mind, and melting his teeth.

Warm darkness encased him, and like Dawnclaw, he welcomed it.

After all, it was the only thing we ever know.

A/N:

I finished this.

Whooooo finally.

I'm actually very proud, considering this is the first fic I've finished.

Fact Of The Chapter: This has been planned from the start, except

in the original version, it was a lot nicer. Sablepaw was actually alive, and it was just showing his future - no reincarnation. Note that StarClan cannot reincarnate, nor the City of Aurora - only Hiraeth.